

VOLUME 3, NUMBER 3

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Rungb

A SOUTH ASIAN QUARTERLY OF CULTURE, COMMENT & CRITICISM

How do you say **Queer** in South Asian?

Queering the Diaspora

Pratibha Parmar's Filmi Fantasies

South Asian Dyke Style

Tantrik Annie

Funny Boy (...and Girls)

Plus Barbie Goes South Asian!

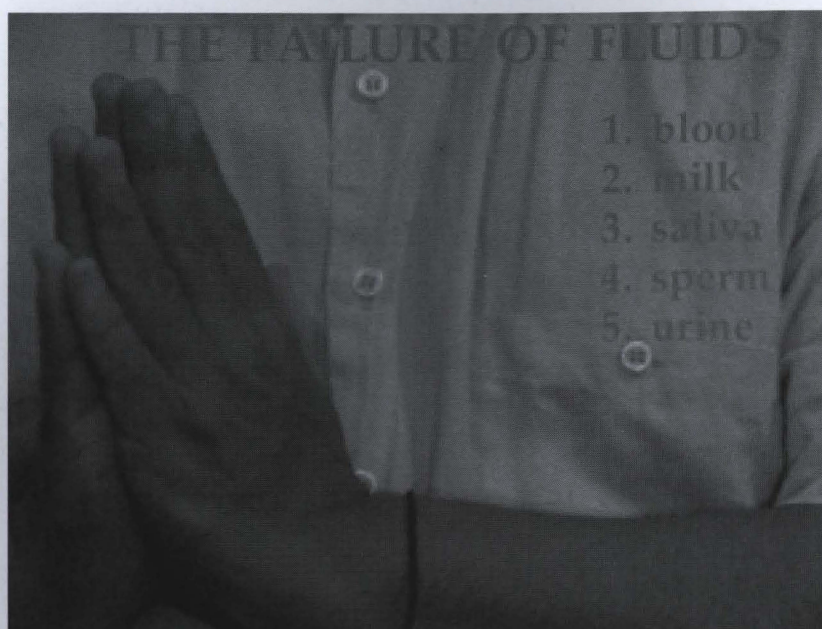
Filmmaker Tanya Syed



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Memory and Mourning

Queering the Diaspora

How Do You Say 'Queer' in South Asia?
Editorial by Ian Ipoh, Rishi Gupta

Notes on a Queer South Asian Planet
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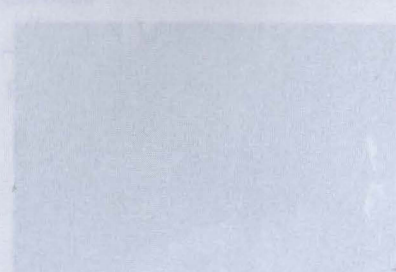
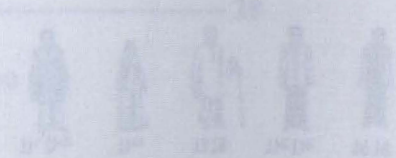
'Funny' Boys and Girls

Can you tell?

Queer Screen

Best Dyer
Frodo Baggins's Film Fantasies

Destiny Desire Devotion
A Queer Cinema





Feature Photographer

Liane Harris's striking portraits

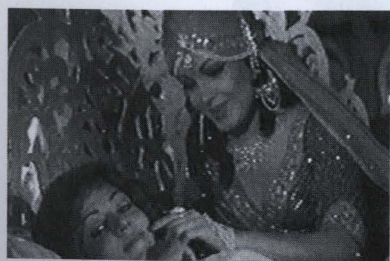
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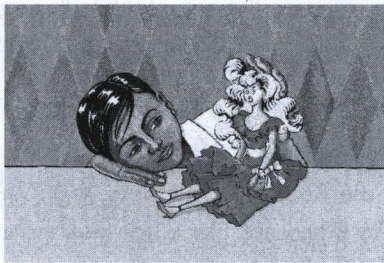
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Rungh

Volume 3, Number 3

RUNGH is an interdisciplinary magazine committed to the exploration of traditional and contemporary South Asian cultural production and its contexts. It is a project of the Rungh Cultural Society, an incorporated, non-profit society.

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Pratibha Parmar's many film and video documentaries include the award winning *Khush, A Place of Rage, Sari Red, Warrior Marks, The Colour of Britain*, and most recently her first drama, *Memsahib Rita*. She is co-editor of *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film* and co-author of *Warrior Marks* (with Alice Walker). She has been invited to serve as a Grand Marshall at the 1995 San Francisco Pride march.

Alistair Raphael is a London based artist whose work has been exhibited throughout Europe.

Ian Iqbal Rashid's *The Heat Yesterday* (poetry and short prose) is forthcoming in October (Coach House: Canada; Serpent's Tail: US/UK). A feature film script, *Good Enough for Cary*, is being produced by the BBC for a 1996 release. He comments on film and literature regularly on BBC Radio 4's *Kaleidoscope*. He divides his life between England and Canada.

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naming names

or How Do You Say 'Queer' in 'South Asian'?

Ian Iqbal Rashid, Guest Editor

A breathtakingly unscientific survey conducted among friends and acquaintances has confirmed this (admittedly half-baked) theory of mine: that homosexuality has been tolerated—to some extent—in South Asian and South Asian diasporic families, if not communities. (South Asian father to his son, who has just come out to him: “Why all the fuss, just get on with it and keep it to yourself. Don’t let it interfere with your studies. And for God’s sake, when you get married, don’t tell your wife about all of this business.”)

Tolerance is meted out on the condition that homosexuality remain a private, and preferably, secretive practice, masked by the public face and conduct of an immaculate heterosexuality; in other words without being named.

This issue of *Rungh* is about naming names. But do these names herald new possibilities? Or does the language on which they are routed mean they are just redesignations of old oppressions? Do they usher in a previously undreamt-of liberation or wild new constraints? How does the emergence of an out South Asian lesbian and gay presence in the West intersect with the now established concept of queer politics and cultures? Can we be queer on ‘our’ own terms? Do we need to be? If they exist, what do these interstices of South Asian and queer look like? And what might they be called?

Armed with an arsenal of theories about ‘Queer’ and ‘Queer Style’, writer and filmmaker Sonali Fernando went out in search of a South Asian lesbian variant. Scrutinising lesbian media, she found images that ranged from the problematic to the diabolical. She returned with ‘an inventory of absence.’ A lesbian support group she came across couldn’t even find a name for themselves: “Lesbianism is ‘anamika’ in South Asian, without/beyond name.” Re-claiming a pejorative is one thing; embracing invisibility, something else. The only artist she came across who was pronouncing the categories of ‘queer’, ‘female’, and ‘South Asian’ in her work was the performance artist/porn princess, Annie Sprinkle. *Tantrik Droplets* is Sonali Fernando’s witty and often despairing report from the realm of this self proclaimed ‘Hindu Goddess.’ (You’ll find another white ‘Goddess’ in this issue: Barbie, a rather tired

journeywoman, is revived and ‘raced’ to the final frontier—[queer?] South Asianness.)

The current bad-boy, bad-girl incarnations of queer that swamp us in our lesbian and gay lives do not have to encrust us in a new orthodoxy. The London based filmmaker Tanya Syed is trying to find a new vocabulary to express her queerness. Radical queerness does not just have to be characterised by ‘outness,’ as Kathleen Pirrie Adams writes in her evaluation of Syed’s body of work, *A Stranger’s*

View. Syed fuses some of the original, ornate significations of the word ‘queer’ with her own Scottish-South Asian lesbian perspective

to offer poignant and kinetic evocations of her world.

In Canada, South Asian lesbian and gay groups have organised and flourished over the last decade. A great deal of South Asian Canadian cultural work has originated and been fostered by these groups: *Desh Pardesh*, the first organisation and festival in the West to identify and explore a diasporic South Asian arts practice was initially established by *Khush*, Toronto’s South Asian gay men’s group. A web of lesbian and gay men’s journals, magazines and newsletters have sprung up across the country and offer networking opportunities to the larger South Asian community. The pages of *Rungh* often feature and review the work of South Asian lesbians and gay men, many of whom have achieved international (and sometimes even national!) prominence. To import and paraphrase the words of the poet June Jordan, there would not be a South Asian Canadian cultural activism without South Asian Canadian lesbians and gay men.

South Asian lesbian and gay artists are beginning to crack the so-called mainstream in Canada as well. Shani Mootoo’s videos, writing and visual artwork have been praised across North America. Her new video, *Her Sweetness Lingers* will win her even wider acclaim. Her work has interrogated not just issues of sexuality and race but of national identity, as well: Canadianness.

One of the great successes in Canadian publishing over the last year is Shyam Selvadurai’s novel *Funny Boy*. As Smaro Kambourelli writes in her appraisal of the novel, “funny... signifies what society decides is queer—strange, unpredictable, unmanageable, ultimately threatening to the status quo.” But when the status quo embraces the once-marginalised, the once-invisible, the until recently un-nameable, do we celebrate or become more vigilant?

Queer South Asianness has now become a transnational affair (or at least a fling). But is the evolution of our queerness just an echo of the evolution of American Gay Liberation? In her article, *Notes on a Queer South Asian Planet*, Gayatri Gopinath deflates that argument. “Consumption,” she argues, “whether of identities or fashions or modes of organising—isn’t about mimicry but is a productive, imaginative act.” In reducing an emerging movement to parody, that argument condescendingly denies queer South Asians agency. The pioneering filmmaker Pratibha Parmar takes the notion of appropriation on a different trajectory. One of the first South Asian artists in the West (or anywhere) to publicly portray lesbian and gay identities, Parmar scans through Bollywood films to reveal and claim her favourite lesbian filmi moments.

Identity is not found in nature but historically constructed in culture, Kobena Mercer has written. In other words, queer, lesbian, gay are not what you are so much as what you do and how and why. We can’t be defined by labels and categories, we can’t hide behind them. We have to name our practices, and not just sexual practice, but how we live all aspects of our lives. And no longer can we be identified with a powerlessness equated with a position of class poverty or societal victimage. At the very least, this characterisation is not always an accurate depiction. But even more importantly, if we continue to build a cultural politics around the theme of a virtue earned through oppression and alienation, we will never learn to speak, as Andrew Ross has written, in a radical accent, the popular language of our times, which is the language of pleasure, adventure, liberation, gratification and novelty.

**These are the languages of our desires.
One day soon, we will name them with ease.**

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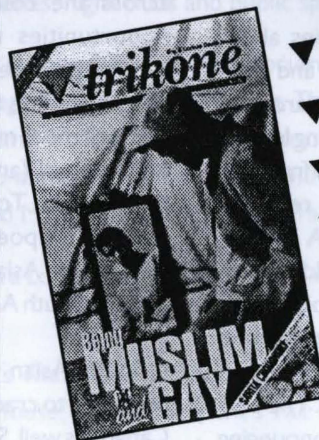
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Notes on a Queer South Asian Planet

Gayatri Gopinath theorises sexuality in the diaspora

What does it mean to queer¹ the diaspora? The question was floating in the back of my mind as I walked into a recent panel discussion entitled "Queer Festivals Go Global," an event organised by the 1994 New York Experimental Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. The very existence of such a panel, and the dialogue that took place during it, seemed to speak to an increasing need shared by many of us to theorise queerness across national borders. But as I listened to the discussion, it became increasingly obvious to me how exceedingly complicated it is to think in terms of a queer diaspora: it is difficult, if not impossible to avoid falling into murky territory while trying to negotiate a path around existing and competing discourses on sexuality, class, authenticity, language... the list goes on. In fact, I walked away from the panel more aware than ever of the ways in which a project of constructing a diasporic queerness is fraught with pleasures and dangers—and plenty of both. All I hope to do with this article is to simply open up areas and dialogue and speculation on what some of these might be.

We already know about the pleasures: as Sivananda Khan says in Pratibha Parmar's documentary film *Khush*, it's all about sex and solidarity. We know what a high it can be to walk into a bhangra party and revel in the sight of queer brown folks doing their thing; or to participate in conferences like *Desh Pardesh* that draw progressive South Asians together from all over the globe. Many of us are also

part of more informal networks of friends and lovers that traverse various diasporic locations. These are but a few of the multiple and proliferating sites—both formal and informal—upon which a South Asian diasporic queerness is being articulated.

So what about the dangers? The pitfalls that the film festival panel ran into are emblematic, I think, of the difficulties inherent in recent formal attempts—like festivals and conferences—in articulating a queer diaspora. The panellists at this particular programme spoke about the problems in transporting queer festivals (that were for the most part conceived in the west) to India, Brazil, Hong Kong, and other parts of the non-Western world. There was a lot of talk among both the panellists and audience members about the need to avoid yet another form of 'cultural imperialism,' where this time around the cultural imperialists would be gay people in the West exporting and imposing their particular brand of queer identity upon unsuspecting non-Western subjects.

I could certainly understand where this well-intentioned concern with imposing 'alien' paradigms and strategies was coming from, given that the weapon most often wielded against any struggle for queer visibility and self-definition is that same-sex sexuality is a Western import, something that is not 'authentically' Indian, Brazilian, etc. (fill in the blank). The necessity we feel to work against and grapple with such notions of authenticity also plays out in the ongoing debate around

what to call ourselves, the language we use to signify oppositional or marginalised or alternative sexualities in a way that doesn't elide certain experiences and histories.

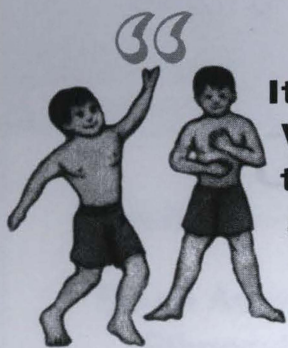
But this is where it gets tricky: in struggling against one prevailing discourse, we find ourselves reconsolidating a number of other, equally problematic ones. One curator at the panel, for instance, talked about how troubled she was that the programme on body-piercing she had taken from New York to Brazil prompted a body-piercing trend in the Brazilian city where it was shown. She didn't seem to recognise that the non-Western 'they' constantly (and at time condescendingly) being referred to has agency, that consumption—whether of identities or fashions or modes of organising—isn't about mimicry but is a productive, imaginative act, that what is consumed is not simply and passively digested but more often than not reworked and forced to resignify. In denying the non-Western 'they' the power to invent—and in reducing 'their' actions to mere mimicry—'they' were effectively shut out of the dialogue that constructs a queer diasporic subject and sensibility.

Nor did anyone problematise the construction of this non-Western 'they' as some kind of monolithic whole, as opposed to one that is differentiated by class, language, and a whole host of other factors. Indeed, there seemed to be a curious reassertion of an us/them binary, where the main trajectory was between 'us' in the West and 'them' in our respective countries of 'origin'—a move that is completely at odds with a diasporic project that sees cultural flow and identity formation in terms of multiple and non-hierarchical sites of exchange and influence.

Can we, then, avoid replicating this kind of conceptual violence and at the same time in terms of a queer diaspora? How do we allow for the fact that same-sex eroticism exists very differently in different diasporic contexts, while

This time around the cultural imperialists would be gay people in the West exporting and imposing their particular brand of queer identity upon unsuspecting non-Western subjects.





**It's all about sex and solidarity.
We know what a high it can be
to walk into a bhangra party
and revel in the sight of
queer brown folks
doing their thing.**



simultaneously recognising the common forms of violence that we face every day because of our sexuality—regardless of whether or not we or others label it as 'queer' or 'lesbian' or whatever? For that matter, what does 'diaspora' mean for South Asians in the first place? Addressing the last question first, we need to keep in mind the limitations involved in theorising ourselves as 'diasporic' subjects at all, even while acknowledging that the notion of diaspora is a useful and necessary one for those of us who inhabit multiple and often contradictory geographic and psychic spaces. As one critic writes: "To be cognisant of oneself as a diasporic subject is always to be aware of oneself, no matter where one is, as from elsewhere, in the process of making [an] appeal to be considered as if one were from here."²

It is this simultaneity of diasporic experience—of being inside/outside—that is so perfectly captured and negotiated by South Asian transnational popular cultural forms such as bhangra. Bhangra has become a general signifier for South Asian-ness from New York to London to Toronto to Bombay, calling into existence a diasporic network of 'affiliation and affect'³ that cuts across national boundaries with remarkable fluidity. In this sense, bhangra enacts a subaltern 'counter-public' space, as queer theorist Jose Munoz terms it, that resists the exclusionary norms of a bourgeois public sphere⁴. Yet, as with most constructions of community and ethnic identity, however oppositional, current articulations of diaspora tend to replicate conventional ideologies of gender and sexuality; once again, certain bodies (queer and/or female) are rendered invisible or marked as Other. I have only to think of a recent bhangra party I went to, where it became rapidly clear to me that I couldn't dance the way I wanted to or with whom I wanted, the space being aggressively and unrelentingly straight.

So how do those of us who fall outside the heterosexual, monogamous norm centre

ourselves as diasporic subjects? Perhaps the strategic appropriation of bhangra by queer South Asians in the West—where it has become a staple at parties and parades as a way of signifying South Asianness to mainstream (white) queer communities, as well as to other queer people of colour—offers a glimpse into what a queer South Asian diaspora could look (and sound) like. To look at the uses to which queer South Asians put bhangra or filmi music or any other popular cultural form available to us is to force us to theorise identity in a way that confound the easy cultural imperialism argument that was being put forward at the film festival panel. It is to realise that such forms of transnational popular practice mean radically different things in different contexts, that it's not about a one-way flow of commodities, identities or models of being and organising; rather, it's about a non-hierarchical web of exchange, where queerness and South Asian-ness are being contested and made anew every step of the way.

It is here, perhaps, within queer South Asian diasporic cultural practices, that a new paradigm of queerness is beginning to take shape. And it seems to do so in a way that formal attempts at forging new ontological paradigms (the film fests and the panels) have yet to catch up to. This isn't to romanticise popular culture, or to reassert the old theory versus practice split, but I do get the sense that what's going on through informal cultural practices (like bhangra) exceeds the theoretical models that we've been working with so far. Paying closer attention to these varied performances of a queer South Asian 'counter-public' demands that we theorise queer diaspora in a particular way: not in terms of some sort of static, general queer South Asian subject that inhabits this diasporic space, not in terms of a notion of both queerness and diaspora that replicates existing power structures between the West and 'the rest.' Rather, this new theorisation of

diasporic queerness opens up tremendous possibilities, posing a powerful challenge to hegemonic constructions of both sexuality and nationhood while articulating the linkages between the two.



Notes

1 I use the word 'queer' in this article as shorthand for indicating an oppositional space outside hetero-normativity. I recognise the term as coming out of a particular political moment in the history of lesbian and gay movements in the West, but find it useful in that it is (in principle at least) gender-neutral and connotes an entire range of alternative sexual practices and sensibilities, in a way that 'lesbian,' 'bisexual' or 'gay' do not.

2 Kenneth Warren, *Appeals of (Mis)Recognition: Theorizing the Diaspora in The Cultures of United States Imperialism*, editors Amy Kapland and Donald E. Pease.

3 The phrase is Paul Gilroy's which he uses to discuss Black diasporic cultural production. See *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge:Harvard University Press, 1993), p16.

4 I am indebted to Jose Munoz's recent lecture on *Latino Bodies, Queer Spaces*, given at Columbia University, for this formulation of the 'counter-public.'

I would like to thank Hiram Perez, Arita Echavez-See, and Shabnum Tejani for much thought-provoking discussion around questions of queerness and diaspora.

With a flick of her video remote,
Pratibha Parmar's filmi fantasies are realised!



Pratibha Parmar

Portrait by Liane Harris

Dramatic emergence: trailblazing documentary filmmaker Pratibha Parmar has recently conquered the world of drama in the BBC produced *Memsahib Rita*.

With a flick of her video remote,
Pratibha Parmar's filmi fantasies are realised¹

Desi Dykes

One of the most vivid memories that I have from my teenage years is sitting in the living room with my family watching Indian movies. I would imagine that the man who was about to kiss the woman behind the unusually large close up of a flower was, in fact, a woman. This fantasy image brought such a hot guilty flush to my body that I remember having to run out of the room. It was only years later that I learned that this kind of transference or substitution—this fantasising—is incredibly common.

I do not want to give a theoretical exploration of how we—as lesbians—receive, appropriate and transform celluloid images as a way of making ourselves known to each other. I do not intend to be a film theorist nor will I deconstruct heavily coded filmic texts searching for lesbian references. Instead, I would like to share with you my observations, impressions and anecdotes: many of them gleaned from sitting around with other South Asian lesbians on long winter evenings in England and watching Hindi movies. Fast forwarding through the boring, predictable comic scenes, and the painfully long languorous heterosexual seduction scenes, we would

rewind, slow down and pause—constantly—during the dance sequences with Rekha in *Umroo Jaan*. We would moan with delight and pleasure at Parveen Babi singing to Hema Malini in *Razia Sultan*.

As diasporic South Asians we hunger for images which in some way reflect our dreams, desires and realities. Media representations are a critical component of identity formation for all people but those of us who are perceived to be on the margins of the mainstream, the malestream and the white stream, our need for reflections of ourselves and our communities is pivotal to our survival. As cultural 'outsiders,' representations of ourselves both on the big screen and on the small screen are important in shaping our sense of selves. For lesbian and gay men the ability to make oneself heard or seen and the ability to alter what others hear and see are very necessary to our survival.

Hindi films play a crucial role for many of us whose links with our ancestral homeland are historically and geographically distant. The Indian film industry is today the largest in the world in terms of annual film production. In 1990, India produced over 800 films—more than two a day. It is the Hindi films made

in Bombay that have a wide appeal to South Asians scattered around the globe, providing cultural and linguistic familiarity. For many people, these films not only keep alive memories of home but sometimes also provide reference points for creating notions of Indianness in different cultural contexts.

Often, these reference points perpetuate the problematic. Often, these films present sexist and degrading images of women, relying on stereotypes of the self sacrificing Indian mother, the harlot, the whore and the pure, downtrodden victim. As South Asian lesbians we have a great stake in media representation. Media images are an important site for contesting and negotiating a whole range of cultural and political values. Many young lesbians form a sense of their identity from media representations, but what is it they see?

Lesbians of all and any colour, culture and ethnicity have been singularly under-represented, or obliterated from any and every media. In mainstream Hollywood films, lesbians have appeared primarily as predatory, or bitter, old angry spinsters, or lost, confused and pathologically deranged women. With a few exceptions such as *Desert Hearts* in 1985²



Deep meaningful gazes, lingering eye contact, hands moving slowly and meaningfully, just touching a breast, the kiss behind the feather fan and my absolutely favourite bit: Hema Malini curling up her toes in orgasmic delight.



there have been no major Hollywood films that have celebrated lesbian sexuality. Inevitably all these images have been of white women, with the exception of *She's Gotta Have It*.

But what we want is not just equal time on the screen. Of much greater concern is how we are portrayed on film. These representations affect our ability to affirm a lesbian existence and also reflect and shape our concept of lesbian sexuality. As lesbians of colour, we have a desire to see ourselves on the screen which resonates from our childhoods, our families and communities.

I want to share two moments from two very different Indian films, both illustrating quite diverse approaches to the often unintended depiction of lesbian sexuality on the screen within Indian cinema.

The first film called *Subha*, was made in the mid-1980s, featuring Smita Patil in the main role. This film is part of the new, progressive cinema in India with an emphasis on realism and social concerns. This film is important not only because of an absence of fantasy or make-believe elements within it, but because it actually names lesbianism, (in English). The story is about an Indian woman's struggle for

an independent identity and her boredom with her role as wife and mother. Smita Patil is a social worker who is a warden of a women's reformatory. My favourite moment begins at the point where the women in the reformatory are celebrating a festival.

There is a group of women, singing and dancing, and they are being led by one particular woman. This woman begins focusing her singing on another woman who is on the swings. As the sequence progresses it becomes delightfully clear to both the viewer and the other women participating in the dance song that these two women are in love and only have eyes for each other. The other women whisper and giggle about the two women lovers and the dancing and singing abruptly has to stop. Later the two women are caught out in bed together and eventually harassed by the other women. The final outcome is, unfortunately, extremely painful and tragic.

This segment of the film always sends chills down my spine because the fear of discovery, the ostracisation and the public humiliation is something that many lesbians and gay men understand. Despite the film's intent on being progressive around this issue, it only succeeds

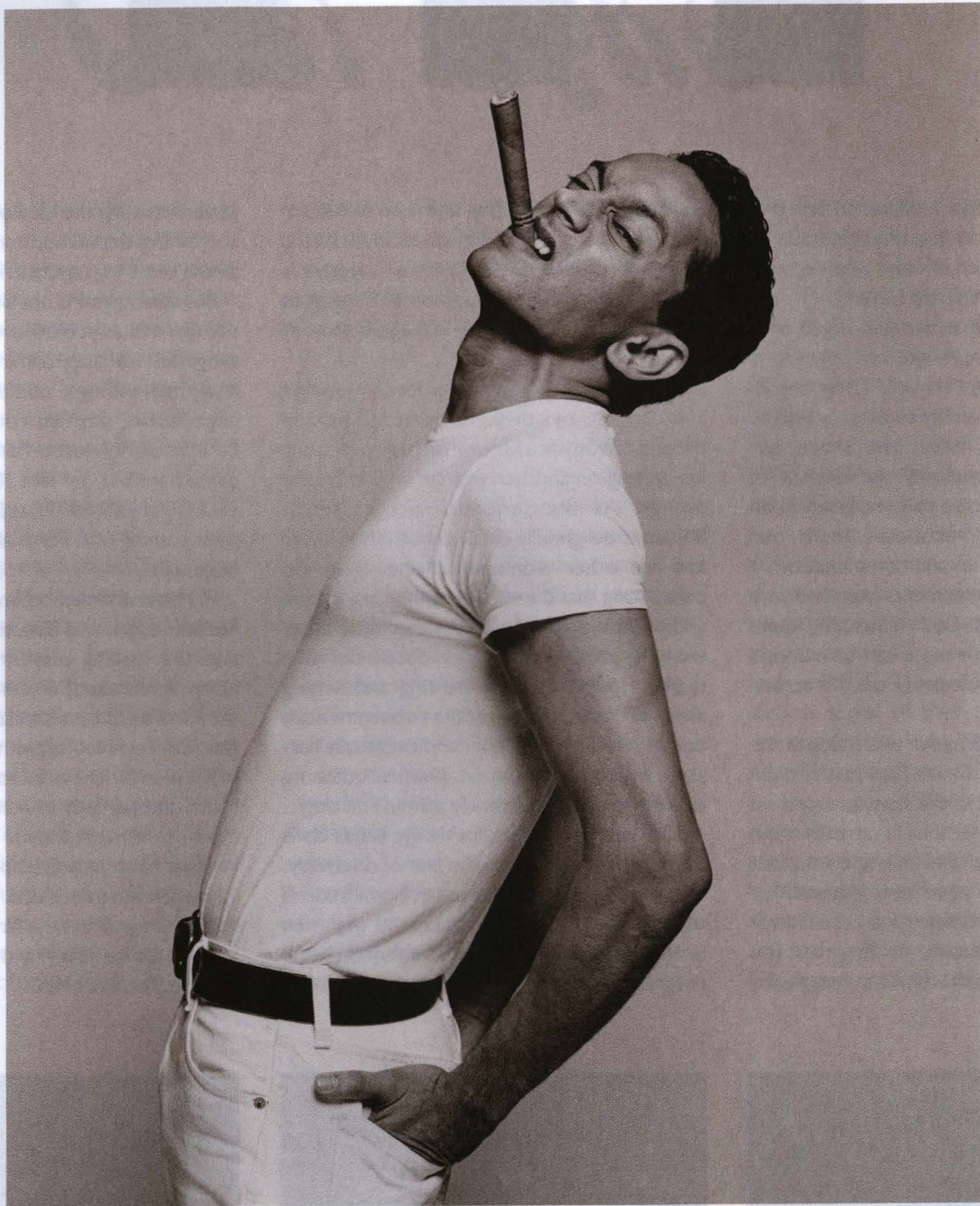
in perpetuating the idea of lesbianism as being something depraved, immoral and a mental illness requiring psychiatric treatment.

But coming out is not always as traumatic as this film makes you believe. Were it not for all the joyful and happy coming out stories that we exchange amongst ourselves from our own experiences, this film could drive us straight back into the closet. For many people who participated in my film *Khush* (produced for Out, Channel 4, 1991), appearing on film meant their coming out. For many of them, it was a huge relief.

My second filmi moment is from a film called *Razia Sultan*. It was directed by Kamal Amrohi and the leading players are Hema Malini, Dharmendra and Parveen Babi. This film about the life of a princess is a classic Bollywood epic, filmed in Technicolor, with lavish sets and a cast of thousands. The princess is played by Hema Malini and her lady in waiting is Parveen Babi, my current heart-throb. The princess falls in love with a slave, played by Dharmendra and so the narrative develops. My favorite moment comes at a point in the film when the princess is pining for her lover, and her lady in waiting is trying to appease her.



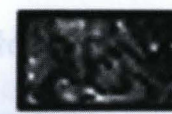
This film is for some of us, this scene has become legendary. It is also absolutely compulsory viewing for all new and uninitiated South Asian lesbians.



Johann Insanally

Portrait by Liane Harris

Movie Moghul: Former director of the much mourned *Picadilly Film Festival*, and British Film Liaison at the Cannes and Berlin festivals, Johann Insanally is now powering his way as producer on Channel 4, *British Film Institute* and BBC projects.



The two women are in a beautiful boat draped with silks; the Hema Malini character is lying down and her lady in waiting is fanning her with a large, white feathered fan. Two young women are rowing them around the beautiful lake which is set within the palace. Parveen Babi sings a romantic song to Hema Malini and drapes herself over her mistress in an intimate manner. Towards the end of the sequence, the fan comes down over the two women as they kiss behind it.

Yes, what you are seeing is a live scene between two women (okay, one of them is fantasising about her absent male lover). And yes, they do kiss!. It's clear that all is not what it should be. We get the final validation of the illicit nature of this act from the two young girls who are rowing the boat. One of them giggles at the sight of the kiss and the other, understanding only too clearly that their throats might be cut as a result, motions for her friend to remain silent.

For me this sequence from *Razia Sultan* is one of the most romantic and erotic scenarios that I have ever seen in a Bollywood film. Deep meaningful gazes, lingering eye contact, hands moving slowly and meaningfully, just touching a

breast, the kiss behind the feather fan and my absolutely favourite bit: Hema Malini curling up her toes in orgasmic delight. For some of us, this scene has become legendary. It is also absolutely compulsory viewing for all new and uninitiated South Asian lesbians.

My friends and I get enjoyment from this despite the fact that the main narrative of the film centres around a heterosexual coupling. There are so few lesbian references or sub-texts in the majority of these films, that we need to re-appropriate and negotiate our own readings: take charge of these images with the reins of our own fantasies.

It is quite clear that neither the masala films from Bombay nor the new wave cinema from India are going to satisfy our hunger and need for positive, affirming and empowering images of ourselves as South Asian lesbians. Re-appropriations—and fantasies—in the end only go so far. It is only when we begin to create these images for ourselves that we can go some way toward registering a lesbian presence on celluloid—a presence defined by our own terms and inspired by our own vision.



1 This presentation was originally made at *Desh Pardesh II: A Festival of South Asian Culture* held in Toronto in 1992.

2 Since doing this presentation the scenario for lesbian films and videos has changed and continues to change. There are several independent feature films that have been made as well as many currently in production. For instance, *Fresh Kill* (by American Shu Lea Cheang), a feature length drama featured South Asian actress Syreeta Chowdrey playing a lesbian character, in a multi racial cast of dykes. Midi Onodera's first feature, *Skin Deep*, is currently screening in England. *Go Fish* (1994) by director Rose Troche, a lesbian-girl-meets-girl story, was a wonderful cross-over success, widely distributed by Samuel Goldwyn. (While the central characters were white, there was a visible African-American and Latina lesbian presence.) Shani Mootoo in Vancouver, Hema B in San Francisco, Tanya Syed in London and Gitanjali in Toronto, are only some of the exciting new South Asian lesbians creating interesting work. Let's hope that by the end of this century (only 5 years to go) that we will be seeing lesbian feature dramas with South Asian women in the lead and behind the camera!



This fantasy image brought such a hot guilty flush to my body that I remember having to run out of the room.

Destiny Desire Devotion

Atif Ghani offers an appraisal of Zahid Dar's first film

Some things just need to be said; some issues need to be aired. Zahid Dar's first film *Destiny Desire Devotion* reveals those issues but in ways that are not entirely satisfying. Through the optic of a women's afternoon gathering, Dar attempts to initiate a discussion revolving around gay male sexuality within the confines of a South Asian community. Dar develops the issues of generational perceptions and expectation, and notions of what is 'proper' through a mother's struggle to come to terms with her son's sexual orientation. The central core of the narrative revolves around a mother's attempts to 'understand' her son's personal choices as juxtaposed to her imagined marital celebrations of her son to another man.

Substantively, Dar pushes many needed-to-be-asked questions to the forefront: what is the place of gay male relations within the South Asian diaspora? Is there a space for dialogue, a space for the mending of perceived cultural tensions? Or will the reality of homosexuality be forever locked away in the attics of South Asian cultures.

In addressing the question of same sex relations, Dar uses the double edged sword of deviance. In an exchange within the group, one woman speaks mournfully of 'our dysfunctional children': **a heroin junkie who is 'almost off the heroin' and a daughter who is presently undergoing 'electro-shock therapy' are brought in as parallel problems to a gay child.** What is successfully revealed are the ways in which very different social issues are easily perceived as 'dysfunctional' within existing South Asian cultural norms. The scene, however, could be read as revealing social 'issues' like drug abuse and mental illness as being more broadly acceptable within perceived South Asian communities rather than, say, issues of sexuality. The danger in



this strategy lies in the reproduction of issues relating to sexual orientation as falling within a binary framework of illness/cures.

Although Dar is successful in isolating and revealing the 'issues,' the representational techniques he uses fall short of revealing the full complexities of those very 'issues.' A moment where his limitations are revealed are in the scenes of the women's afternoon gathering. This scene could have been an exploration of the ways in which social values are reproduced from generation to generation, through the apparatus of 'women's spaces' or oral history, for example. The emergence and reproduction of homophobia within South Asian communities is not a simple process. **It is too easy to play out homophobic tensions into bad/good or illness/cure formulations.**

The film fails to sustain a complex level of discussion, both literally within the scenes of the women's discussions, and also in a larger sense—as a polemical text. As a result, the film fails to lay down a foundation for a constructive dialogue around issues of sexuality for South Asian communities.

It seems to me that the goal for a piece such as this might have been not only to reveal the limits of people's fetish of the 'proper,' but in delineating the construction of this need. Clearly, film practitioners are limited by factors such as funding and experience, but in representing the emergence of cultural identities, we must try to transcend our immediate social contexts and attempt to speak at a level which avoids reproducing prevailing social conceptualisations. Put simply, we need to tell stories differently, and not allow ourselves to get caught in situations where we are using a familiar vocabulary to tell new stories. We need to begin the more difficult task of imagining alternative ways of imaging and imagining.

Formally, the film reveals the weaknesses of a first time director: with the odd shot out of focus, abrupt cuts on the soundtrack, and occasionally muffled dialogue. Nevertheless, the film is an important response to the state of the debate around issues of sexuality in the South Asian diaspora. Dar is only one of a handful of South Asian cultural practitioners in Britain attempting to explore issues of male sexuality. The problem with the film is not in the issues that it raises: these issues must be raised. The problem which the film does not solve is in how to reveal the complexities and specificities of these issues, whilst paving the way toward initiating a meaningful and constructive dialogue within South Asian communities.



Destiny Desire Devotion, Zahid Dar, 16mm, 10 minutes, 1994

Barbie's New Home

Text by Ian Iqbal Rashid

Images by Adrienne Vasanti Salgado

1.

Barbie is unhappy. She knows her rights. She knows what was hers to expect and enjoy. A house, grand and uneventful. Predictable. Barbie would have been happy there. A house flashing with laughter and mirrors, burdened only by big armchairs and oversized cushions for her hard little bottom. Burdened only by last year's colours. But Barbie wouldn't have minded. She's polite that way.

Big floppy flowers that last and last and last. Like daytime in the summer, Barbie knows what to expect. But look at what has happened. Things aren't what they used to be. Change. Barbie has been thrown into the face of change, like a petal into a big wind.

2.

Dark and smiling and noisy. Very dark. This family is much different from Barbie. Different from Malibu Barbie, Barbie's unduly tanned alter ego. This family is even darker skinned. A house full of mocha coloured children. Different.

But then all children are different from Barbie. They don't, poor dears, enter the world fully formed like she does. Little globes of cobalt blue knowing for eyes. A little whim of a nose. Children change all the time. Grow and change, develop spots and unfortunate pendulous breasts, or worse still, no breasts at all: those little girls who demand brassieres and waste money. And the big ones who refuse them, costing nobody anything. Except modesty. And who profits from a lack of modesty? Barbie's breasts on the other hand do have a price. Envy. Envy and nineteen dollars ninety-five.

3.

Barbie's new 'friend' is a boy. (Barbie never has owners, only 'friends,' she is built that way, quotation marks and all.) And even more unusual, he's a little brown boy. No chance for envy here. Or is there? Something splits the air when his big cow eyes look her way. Barbie stares back at him constantly, her gaze steadily forward, her smile gripped into place by a round of determination in her cheek (do her nerves show?). Barbie stares steadily forward. She longs for eyelids.

At night he holds her to him with love. She is as close to his mouth as saliva and she is frightened. She doesn't recognise. She knows what men are, their inevitability, it's been built into her. By men themselves. But this boy is different.

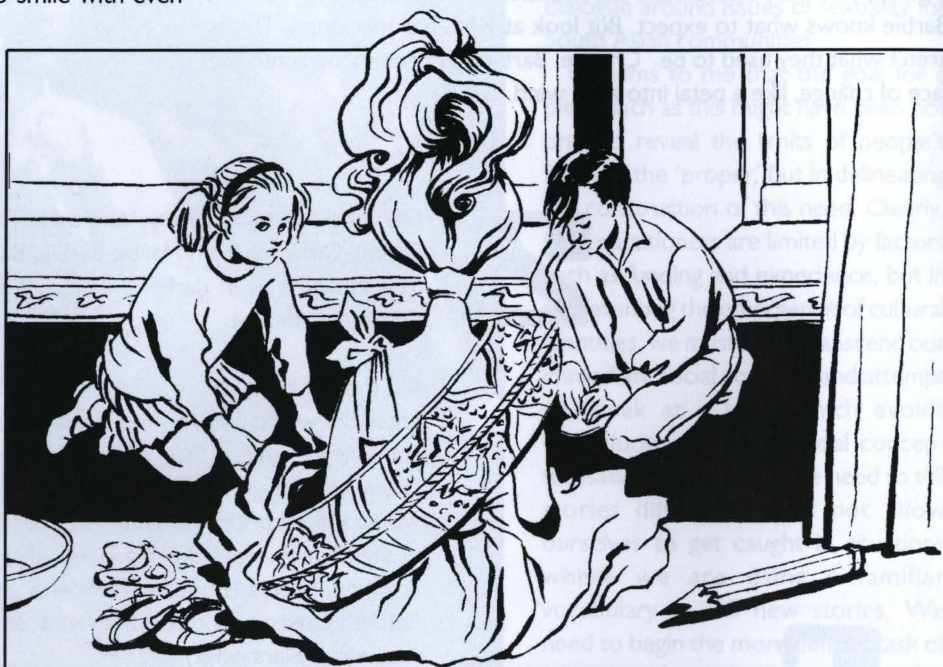
Men are supposed to be dark. Tall, dark and handsome. But this dark? And everything is exposed in this boy. Where are the shrewd eyes, the lecher's mouth? Where are those crinkling saran wrap words, those looks of sweetness with worrying hints of dislike, ebbing into speculation, flowing into promise. Barbie knows what she knows. And she knows what to expect. This...this is something else.



Everywhere the smell of curry and hope. Hope permeates the air like the source of a scent beyond view. The child plays with eager fervour. Barbie's roles are not unfamiliar: movie star, spy, stewardess—oops, flight attendant—but such elaborate fantasies, no easy narratives here. Plots from old films, dancing and singing numbers (in so many languages) and then, even worse.... Twisted, shapeless romances. Unrequited love stories in which Barbie has to figure prominently. Not a wedding in sight. (A shame because Barbie comes with a full-length gown made of synthetic lace—highly flammable, but children should not be playing with matches, should they?) Barbie knows only to be Barbie. To be dressed swiftly, propped up, to twirl. This is different.

The boy's sweat glands are beginning to change. Curry and hope and a man's sweat. Barbie knows only to be Barbie, she's not up for much more. She has always been grateful about her lack of genitalia, no smelly orifices to confuse her. She is grateful now. She remembers to smile with even greater urgency .

I know what I know, she thinks. And that is all.



5.

Barbie is concerned about her little fashion purse. And her little mini dress. She is being carried from room to room, naked. No purse, no dress. She is more than concerned (dark eyes surround her). She is distressed. The fashion earrings that she has been given are wrong. Meant for someone else. A different outfit, some other girl. Hoops as big as slave bands, flashing a lethal light across the dark walls. If she could perspire, Barbie decides, she would now. She must leave this place.

6.

Hope and exercise, plans for improved status. Life here is unified and over-real, exhausted eyes and tough feet. Barbie wants out. She is plotting. A tight-lipped, pink faced girl comes to visit the big eyed boy. They play all the wrong games but Barbie is aware of being stared at hard and with envy. Sneaky eyes which Barbie recognises. Oh, she knows this girl. There is something here she can work with. She will not have to wait long. Soon, she'll be whisked out. Leave behind a trace of her cool, slick surface and the smell of marigolds. And a brief, tearing sensation that will last long after she has been stolen away into a peppermint scented pocket and whisked down a stairwell. Barbie knows what she knows. And that is all.

BARBIE GOES SOUTH ASIAN

■■■■ IN COLOUR ■■■■



Barbie's New Home
Adrienne Vasanti Salgado



Interrupt

by Alistair Raphael

On the wall next to my bed I keep a postcard. It is a black and white photograph of the corner of a bedroom: the bed with white crumpled sheets seems somehow bare and naked. You can see that just before the picture was taken there were two people lying next to each other in the bed. In the untidy sheets, the mark of their bodies and the warmth they left behind, I can sense their intimacy, their love perhaps. This photograph, which was not even taken here, captures the atmosphere of loneliness that, for me, is the essence of war and I realise that there is no-one I can send it to who could understand this special kind of loneliness which enters your soul in the middle of war. It is like having a piece of ice inside my chest. Where are they now? I keep asking myself. What happened to the people from this room? What happened to us? To me? To love? The emptiness, the absence of people bothers me, and makes me cry.

Text: "Letter from Zagreb"

from *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*
by Slavenka Draculic, Vintage, 1993

BARBIE GOES SOUTH ASIAN

■■■■ IN COLOUR ■■■■



Oriental Mistress, Plastic Passions

Anita Kaushik

Tantrik Droplets

Sent on assignment to examine the state of South Asian lesbian 'style'
Sonali Fernando runs into a 'Hindu goddess' named Annie.

Project Number 1

"A critical and possibly poetic piece on style among lesbians of the South Asian diaspora." Ian shares his ambitions for the piece: "Queer reappropriations of the feminine, how this might play itself out for South Asian dykes...queer activism as style?...the uses of style as activism?... Oh, and make it witty."

Author

Mid-Nineties hyphenate (film-TV-words) pursuing the convergence of glamour and truth. Queer in a (currently) desi dyke's body.

Place

London, England. I go looking for the subculture I am to study, like any anthropologist of the old school.
And return with an inventory of absence.

Field Work

1 Lesbian Archives hesitate. Hmm, they don't know, they have an 'ethnic section,' would I like to come in and browse.

2 *Shebang*, Britain's arch, resolutely tacky lesbian teen magazine, is manufacturing a new 'babe' subculture with its own essential argot—'vixatronic,' 'babelicious,' 'foxtastic.' I find what you might call a South Asian virtual presence inside its covers: a personal ad with a voice mail number.

3 *Quim*, a 'journal for dykes of all persuasions' has more: 16 pages where 'Black Women Speak Out.' But there is only one South Asian woman—the naked centrefold—who reclines to be loved (presumably saving her comments for later) on a chaise longue, while her girlfriend prepares to fuck her. On another page a reviewer raves over Annie Sprinkle's *Sluts and Goddesses* video, and the 'myriad of personas available to the modern girl' according to Annie. The personas include: 'slut, [Hindu] goddess, slave and nurse.' And then the demo: Annie discloses her secret 'new age (read 'Tantrik') breathing techniques designed to heighten your sexual response.'

4 In another magazine a lesbian mail-order video company promotes itself with an image of Annie Sprinkle dressed up as a 'Hindu goddess.' Her seven arms brandish camcorder, handcuffs, heart, dildo, camera, candlestick, and a vibrator en-fisted in front of her yoni. She sits with her impossible stilettos crossed like swords, beaming quite unlike a deity while a snake creeps round her patent boots.

5 A lesbian splinter group of the South Asian gay nightclub/rights and support network 'Shakti' is looking for a name. No one can think of a suitable one in any South Asian language—because there aren't any. Lesbianism is 'anamika' in South Asian, without/beyond name. The compound 'Shaktishali' has been mooted because someone had a friend from India who spoke Hindi and suggested it, but no one can remember what it means.

6 A monsoon of US-imported queer zines and sex-positivity. Anita shows me *Slippery when Wet*. Inside, no South Asians, but two photographs by Sprinkle.

Inconclusions

Regarding the 'culture to be studied' as an entity existing independently of its description, one revisits the failures of anthropology. More of the 'new ethnographic' approach is needed, analysis of the subculture produced (rather than described) in discourse. Especially because this is a subculture produced publicly as ghost, namelessness, passivity and silence.

The problem with all subcultural 'style guides' is the limitation imposed by definition...A few years ago, GQ men's magazine ran a feature entitled 'Pretty Ethnics,' in which it decided that South Asian women were now beautiful, sexy and stylish: colourful accessories for the reader to wear on [his] arm; pretty cufflinks/pretty ethnics. The dilemma of enfleshing the power structure's ghosts is always about the terms on which this happens, what is authorised and what is not. I grow reluctant to speak to my brief.

Anyway, in the Venn diagram 'queer,' 'female' and 'South Asian referenced,' I can not ignore the fact that Annie Sprinkle so frequently occupies the overlap.

In the Venn diagram 'queer,' 'female' and 'South Asian referenced,'
I can not ignore the fact that Annie Sprinkle
so frequently occupies the overlap.

Project Number 2

Tantrik Annie

Annie Sprinkle is a character played by whore-turned-performance artist Ellen Steinberg, as both stage role and life personality: it is a feature of Annie Sprinkle that she not only presents herself as an effect of performance ('perfected over nineteen years'), but also claims reincarnatory intimacy with a real Annie Sprinkle 'who died in Baltimore a hundred years ago.'¹ She claims to be self-fashioned but also predetermined, both construction and essence. She builds her performance around a sexually-explicit autobiography whose reliability is constantly called into question by the exaggerations of her persona and her saturation with make-believe.

Annie Sprinkle confounds the 'mutually exclusive' formulation embedded in much contemporary thought, and adopts sometimes both, sometimes neither, of the positions artist/pornographer, good woman/bad woman, pro-woman/anti-woman, porn director/porn star, powerless/powerful, heterosexual/homosexual. Though an artist, Sprinkle fulfils the pornographer's contract to stimulate audience sexual pleasure. But her mode is unorthodox: she appropriates the generic convention of the male 'money-shot'—the corporeal confession of pleasure that pornography craves—and substitutes her prolific female ejaculations. Though a pornographer she engages with the main concern of female performance artists since the Sixties, that of healing the schizoid rift between private and public domains. But her mode is disarmingly literal: she solicits her audiences of hundreds to approach the stage and view her cervix with the aid of a speculum and torch. This Public Cervix Announcement both parodies and flatters the economy of the Visual in which pornography thrives.

"In a way, I wanna say, 'Fuck you, guys—you wanna see pussy. I'll show you pussy.'"² She uses the Visual to subvert its own dictatorship.



Annie Sprinkle. Photo by Amy Ardrey; art direction by Leslie Barany.

In a way, I wanna say,
"Fuck you, guys—you wanna see pussy.
I'll show you pussy."

**She is teasingly, and threateningly, competing with men
in the patriarchal economy that measures sexual potency
in terms of genital size and quantity of ejaculate.**

By introducing a genital zone not normally associated with sexual pleasure—the cervix—and also literally opening to view a huge area of internal sexually-sensitive tissue, Annie Sprinkle bluntly refutes 19th and 20th century sexological views both that female sexual equipment is a diminutive isomorph of its male counterpart (an idea derived through purely visual evaluation of the external genitals) and that erotic pleasure is limited to two distinct areas, vaginal and clitoral. She is teasingly, and threateningly, competing with men in the patriarchal economy that measures sexual potency in terms of genital size and quantity of ejaculate.

Sprinkle is also an educator, and, in her *Sluts and Goddesses* workshop, a supportive catalyst of women's sexual self-exploration: the self-styled 'whore with a heart of gold' nurtures her participants' erotic pleasure by warmly exhorting them to explore their bodies and fantasies; they, in the same generous key, stimulate her manually while cheering her on, midwifing her orgasms.³ Her polysexual screen exploits, in which she 'invites' the viewer to participate, engage the spectator as male and female, heterosexual and homosexual. In so doing they transgress the norm of male, heterosexual address, and elicit a queer, sexually multivalent gaze.

Annie Sprinkle combines a theatre of confession with a theatre of surface, on a stage that posits gender and sexuality as commutable roles. but in what way does she foreground race as performance? What does she mean when she impersonates other races, as she does in her goddess posturing, swathed in the trappings of calendar image Hinduism, or in her Orientalist photographs of performance artist Linda Montano (her 'spiritual advisor'), where, for instance, in the soft-focus still 'Guru Leendah,' Montano is adorned with satin, lace and jewels and seated next to an Indian religious bronze, wearing a bindi and a blonde wig?⁴ The feminist cultural critics who have espoused Sprinkle's work with such unequivocal elation tacitly condone her exotic/Orientalist objectification of non-Western ethnicities.⁵ Sprinkle's 'Tantrik' claims are accepted with what sounds like staggering naiveté: "an eclectic exploration of the outer reaches of sexuality, combining Eastern philosophy, yoga, meditative breathing, spirituality and healing...A performance might include a monologue, a one-woman sex show...and a Tantrik healing ritual"⁶; "breathing orgasms into non-genital sex and spirituality into orgasms, Sprinkle seduces deconstruction."⁷ Never mind that these 'outer reaches' (a tellingly Occidental phrase) involve years of dedicated training in highly controlled conditions, and that Tantra will not submit to the logic of the 'weekend workshop' or the stage encore. While Sprinkle wittily animates sexual difference, probing its manufacture in visual, verbal and economic terms, she flattens ethnic difference to a glib mimicking of visual appearance and trite 'spiritual sound bites,' converting the

unknown East by means of the known West, converting difference into ethnic sameness.

In relation to ethnicity, Sprinkle short-changes her own project: that of examining her 'essence' while delighting in her 'construction.' By failing to explore her essence/construction as 'white' alongside her construction /essence as 'woman' or 'whore,' Sprinkle fails to relativise race in a way that would allow for truly intercultural 'play.' Her inability, or refusal, to grasp Tantra or the culture from which it emerges by any other means than shallow visual references (which are also inappropriate, because her calendar-style, glitzy 'goddesses' are part of the commercialised mainstream patriarchal tradition, and many moons away from the primeval goddesses of Tantra) betrays the obduracy of her white Americentrism. The 'slut/Goddess' opposite that she attempts to deconstruct with the women in her workshops is none other than the old Christian dichotomy of Madonna and whore, in Indian garb. The deities she represents are sanitisations of the flesh-eating, self-beheading, skeletal, graveyard-haunting, necrophiliac goddesses of Tantrism; in all her depictions of the Goddess, her smile frozen in a permanent 'cheese,' Annie Sprinkle has ex(or)cised the Terrible Goddess, Kali, Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer of Time. Sprinkle remains an Orientalist, a Westerner who has used a Western-constructed notion of the East, on Western terms. The elision 'Tantrik' and 'New Age' is already a form of appropriation. By locating itself as a temporal metaphor, the discoveries of a happening new Western generation, 'New Age' like any imperialism, conceals the geographical and cultural sources of its plunder. It is therefore no surprise that India, Indians and the Indian subcontinent are never mentioned, and 'Tantra' by name, only rarely. Sprinkle then becomes the authoritative modern interpreter of an (unlocated) 'ancient' lore: and a porn star with a Unique Selling Point.

Annie Sprinkle's approach to her 'spiritual practice' is cheerfully orgasm-oriented. "I'm just now getting to where I can have clitoral orgasms on top of other kinds: energy orgasms, breath orgasms, kundalini orgasms, heart orgasms, Third Eye orgasms."⁸ Instrumentality is not alien to Tantra: Tantra itself means 'instrument' in Sanskrit. But in Tantra, sex, and the implicit rousing of "all the faculties—sense, emotions and intellect—to their highest pitch."⁹ is an instrument used to apprehend the fundamental unity of all things and move beyond linear time. Sex is not itself enlightenment: this is to confuse the pane of glass with the view. Tantra's emphasis on shedding the self and dissolving all separations means moving beyond the realm of the visual and performative, both of which imply the separation of looker and looked that is crucial to pornography: there is a fundamental contradiction here for Sprinkle. You cannot 'do' Tantra as performance.

**Tantra's emphasis on shedding the self and dissolving all separations means moving
beyond the realm of the visual and performative...
You cannot "do" Tantra as performance.**

Desi Dyktopia/Queering Tantra

However, there are aspects of Sprinkle's take on Tantra that are latently challenging, if only they had been worked. I dream of a queer, South Asian diasporic female artist who will take up the challenge of a radical engagement with Tantra in work where she contextualises herself, as well as Tantra, in culture and history, stages and subverts Tantra's own tyrannies, and goes beyond 'sex manual' tips on how to have more satisfying orgasms. Can we queer up the racialised gaze in the same way the sexual gaze is queer in Sprinkle's work? Can we queer up Tantra, a spiritual method that already relies heavily on transgression? There is certainly room for an interpretation that would destabilise the primacy of heterosexuality in Tantra (along the lines of Giti Thadani's semiotic project with Sanskrit texts¹⁰). This would mean radically shifting the allegorical functions of masculinity and femininity in Tantrik practices—such as the tendency for women to become allegories of creation and conduits for male transformation, rather than flesh and blood creatures undergoing their own eroto-spiritual change.

For Tantrik philosophy and practice are not short of opportunities for feminist, lesbian-positive interpretation. In Shakti's dance, rehearsed by the female Tantrika during intercourse as the couple return from the state of non-difference, it is Shakti who creates the "bewildering array of separate facets which compose the objective Universe"¹¹: and she does so through her own genitals. The universe of differentiation, of language, is generated through the goddess' yoni, so that she enacts production, not reproduction, in a huge ejaculation that is the genesis of the differentiated, meaningful world. Sprinkle touches on this distinction with her emphasis on the yoni as ejaculatory producer rather than progenic reproducer, underlined through her embracing of sodomy and oral sex, her dildo-play, her sex with women—forms of sensuality sundered from the tyranny of procreation. In Tantra, the existence of the world is conventionally thought of as "a continuous giving birth by the yoni resulting from a continuous infusion of the seed of the male in sexual delight."¹² Let this be refigured: as continuous ejaculation by the yoni resulting from endless intercourse with the female in sexual ecstasy...



Notes

- 1 'Annie Sprinkle' in *Angry Women*, published by Re/Search Publications
- 2 *ibid.*
- 3 *The Sluts and Goddesses Video Workshop*, directed by Maria Beatty, Annie Sprinkle, 1992
- 4 Photographs in *Sacred Sex... 1 + 1 = 1*, book by Annie Sprinkle, cited in *Angry Women*.
- 5 See Chris Straayer, *The Seduction of Boundaries*, and Linda Williams, *A Provoking Agent*, essays in *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power*, edited by Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson (British Film Institute, 1993)
- 6 Andrea Juno's introduction to interview in *Angry Women*
- 7 Chris Straayer, *The Seduction of Boundaries*
- 8 *Angry Women*
- 9 Philip Rawson, *Tantra*, published by Thames and Hudson
- 10 Giti Thadani, 'Anamika' in *What Lesbians do in Books*, edited by Elaine Hobby Chris White
- 11 Philip Rawson, *Tantra*
- 12 *ibid.*

A Stranger's View

Obscure Objects and Space Oddities in the Films of Tanya Syed

by Katharine Pivik Adams

Shani Mootoo in a 2000 interview by David Gauntlett



Cathay Che

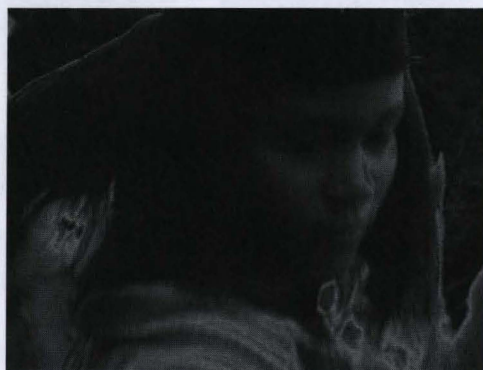
Portrait by Liane Harris

Media Goddess: Cathay Che is resident femme-fatale film critic on US Gay Entertainment Television's *Party Talk*. She also appears regularly on Public Television's *In the Life*. Her nationally syndicated movie column now appears in *PoZ*, *Etc*, *HX* and *The Bay Area Reporter*.

Her Sweetness Lingers

Shani Mootoo's new video reviewed by Ian Iqbal Rashid

I'm afraid of dying.
This is not the sentence I had intended to start with.
I'm afraid of dying.
It's more of a conclusion.
Why else would I be afraid to touch you?



So begins the voiceover in Shani Mootoo's new video-poem, *Her Sweetness Lingers*. The film is a meditation on lost love, a love lost before it has been allowed to begin.

The video itself begins with two women in a robust garden, with a waterfall hissing in the background. Individual shots of the two women are intercut and overlain with images of flora and of the waterfall. The voiceover—performed and written by Mootoo—speaks of desire: of love and loss, sex and death. The over-saturated words are almost too-lush, they spill languorously over the compositions and images. The result is incredibly moving (and sexy) yet ironic: the video both satirises and valorises the love poem.

There is an awareness in this piece that the discourses of love have often gained an added poignancy in being modified by the notion of loss. Whether clearly articulated or a tacit presence, notions of loss have been, throughout the history of the love poem, inextricably linked to love. In that sense this video-poem also functions as a kind of elegy. Metaphors of death in relation to love are referenced in ways and on many levels: as orgasm, for example, and also as an end to longing. Within the act of touching, of sex—longing is both fed and extinguished—another kind of death. (For the many gay and lesbian audiences to whom this video will undoubtedly play, other forms of elegy will be invoked. Remembering a time before AIDS—another silent presence in this tape—the piece also mourns a more 'innocent' ways of conceptualising desire.)

Garden's (and the 'N' word: nature) have figured prominently in Mootoo's work. In *The Wild Women of the Woods*, an earlier video, she satirised 'The Great Canadian Theme': the quest for a (national) identity in the wilderness. Mootoo (playing?) a South Asian butch-dyke enters the Canadian wilderness to seek out her long-desired South Asian 'femme-ness.' Along the way she meets a feisty Goddess who shatters her preconceived notions of femininity and the myths of the pliant, submissive Oriental woman—all to a Calypso beat (Mootoo is originally from Trinidad): the resolution of another identity conundrum in the Canadian wilderness.

The garden has also figured prominently in Mootoo's writing and artwork (she is also a published writer of short stories, and a visual artist). As Monica Gagnon has noted, both in her writing and in her artwork, 'Mootoo's gardens are distinctively female spaces... they [can] be seen in the genre of feminist Utopias.' Garden imagery also summons the history of 'culturally constructed, idealised and impossible state of nature in representation,



and by implication, then of gender and femininity.' In *Her Sweetness Lingers*, Mootoo goes even further. Nature is summoned to serve the historical unnatural. At the centre of this piece are two women (one of whom is literally) bouncing, shivering with longing for one another. The history of representations beseeching heterosexual love are invited, then dismissed.

But at the centre of the videotape is a moment of passion—as fragile and ephemeral as a bloom. *Her Sweetness Lingers* seems to have been made to preserve this moment. Certain of its passing, Mootoo wants to commit to memory what might otherwise be lost forever:

Listen, just listen for one minute:
If we can nip death in its unborn phase
We will claim a victory of a kind...

Her Sweetness Lingers, Shani Mootoo,
Videotape 9 minutes 1994



A Stranger's View

Obscure Objects and Space Oddities in the Films of Tanya Syed

by Kathleen Pirrie Adams



Tanya Syed's *Delilah*

In *That Obscure Object of Desire*, Louis Bunuel builds the film's narrative around a male protagonist's erotic obsession with a young woman. Bunuel brain-teases the viewer (and ridicules the character) by casting two different actresses in the same role: a perfect remark on the perils of objectification. Or, perhaps, conversely, a perfect remark on the perils of an impartial desire.

There was a time, in Britain especially, when non-representational, materialist, reflexive filmmaking was considered the most thorough and uncompromised form of cultural politics, the most radical and aggressively anti-bourgeois undertaking. One of the most well-known proponents of this 'school,' Peter Gidal, renounced all images of women, under the assumption that such tactics would insure the avoidance of cinematic sexism and the political and moral complications of erotic objectification. Although the argument has its interesting points, and a certain annoyance-

value, I always suspected that this anti-illusionist impulse was simply the other side of Bunuel's mirror-game.

The complications that surround the cinematic image as a site of desire, its ability to not only signal or locate but also to engage ambivalence, uncertainties and even, sometimes, what appear to be the ineffable aspects of life, sometimes evoke strange renunciations and polemics. If the association of watching with subordination and sadistic power goes unquestioned or unanalyzed/unexplored then it is possible to declare this visual register impossibly corrupt, irredeemable.¹ But, if, alternatively, we start with the assumption that the order of the image is not only implicated in the existent power relations and representational regularities, but also essentially unable to avoid a fundamental excessiveness (an inability to become absolute, the whole picture,) our point of departure insures the possibility of change, exploration and invention. It might also

release us from a fear of fantasy and misrecognition that paralyzes, not only desire, but also our capacity for ethical engagement.

When I first saw Tanya Mahboob Syed's *Salamander*, a riveting compendium of abstract images and story fragments from a nocturnal dream-city, it called to mind a part of my own history that I enjoy in an abstracted and nostalgic way and hooked me on a number of points of identification, some probably no more than self-serving projections. The incandescent night scenes and the restless mobility of the camera (further heightened by the rhythmically reiterated shots of traffic), the sense of waiting, the weightlessness of the film's convening eye, the cadence of the repetition of beautifully abstracted and skillfully composed images: here was a text of the city that perfectly described a pleasurable sense of wandering and waiting while simultaneously embracing the beauty of the detail.

A camera that watches the Cyprus Kebab

A Stranger's View Her Sweetness Lingers

Obscure Objects and Space Oddities in the Films of Tanya Syed
by Kathleen Piris Adams
Shani Rabbat and by reviewer editor's column



Tanya Mahboob Syed

Portrait by Liane Harris

Reeling: Tanya Mahboob Syed's stunning images have impressed film audiences around the world. The recently completed *Chameleon* and *Delilah* have confirmed Tanya's reputation as one of Britain's most interesting young artists.

**The 'fixating' of the other works
together with the disavowal of difference
as the means for constructing marginality
and insuring invisibility.**

shop from across the road and then, later, glides across the hands, chests and faces of the card players inside, fixates on the video game and then slides under a truck's belly, disregarding conventional limits and laws of space and scale through which the reality of dramatic narrative is secured, provide the viewer with a sense of both unencumbered mobility and the voyeur's vantage point. It is this drama of motion and aesthetically rendered detail, rather than any psychological characterization, that form the core of the film's sense of subjectivity. This is, however, only one part of the *Salamander* story. The film is not a document of perpetual or total dislocation, nor is the film's restless soul without its moments of incarnation and attachment. Like Syed's two other films, *Chameleon* and *Delilah*, there is also a strong sense of fetish, one which intersects comfortably with the film's peregrinations and lends itself to the evocation of a sense of queerness which raises a number of questions about the kinds of identities and identifications that emerge interstitially.

In most of the original material describing the practices and sensibilities of the flaneur, (in particular, those of Baudelaire, Balzac and Walter Benjamin) it is his dispassionate participation in the urban spectacle that is emphasized. Vision and action become one; the flaneur's observations are his identifications. He is part of the poetry of the city which does not require the 'who' or 'why' of his being.² What is interesting about the figure of the flaneur is first the way it highlights spectatorship as a way of absorbing and integrating information, of varying degrees of abstraction or interest, from a multitude of sources; and second, by extension, the way this form of involvement suggests a potential to "transform the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment."³

Like *Salamander*, this relic of the 19th

century provides a sense of the permeability of the border between public and private life, and the importance of visibility and surface. Unlike Syed's film, however, the flaneur represents a disintegrating subjectivity, one that nevertheless maintains its former certainties within its cynicism or what Baudelaire referred to as 'spleen.'

Although there is one moment when a young woman with collar-length hair, wearing a red shirt, is seen, in close-up, looking directly into the camera thereby suggesting her centrality in the film's sketchily drawn narrative of lesbian desire, the overall impression is that *Salamander* creates an ex-centric subject. Shifting between a player's relation to the video card game (which calls up only one card: the queen of spades), an outside observer's relation to the kebab shop's resident players, an idler's relation to the urban night world, a lover's relation to the (incidentally Asian?) tomboy truck driver and a fetishist's relation to her truck-wielding hands, the film represents subjectivity as belonging to both public and private, the unowned and the heart's own, or, to draw out the implications of the film's title, both land and water.

What this amphibious identity suggests is the possibility of exceeding an either/or logic. It also suggests the point of no return for the strict opposition of centre and margin. And even though it does this by registering things as dispersed but overlapping, it doesn't degenerate into a world of everything, nothing...whatever. Particulars remain important.

The erotic association of the truck driver and the woman in red, as well as the sense of community that is evident in the comings and going at the restaurant offset the sense of disassociation that often comes with wandering. And so although the overall structure of the film acts against the reification of identity, it does not, on the other hand, embody the alienation of a subject in the

process of historical eclipse. Through its peregrinations *Salamander* traces and cultivates (at least) two significant axis of connection which situate and contextualize it's part relations and it's transitory reflections: the erotic and the collective. In contemporary theory this sort of ex-centric eroticism is most often discussed in terms of the queer, and, in terms of the negotiation of collective or cultural identity, it is in the discourses of post-colonialism that we find a similar tendency.

One of the central assertions of the work of queer theorists Michael Warner and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is that the homo runs throughout the culture: it is never entirely outside the heteronormative order but rather integral to its delineation and its centrality. The queer enterprise then, attempts to identify the trace of homosexual otherness within the dominant (ostensibly pure heterosexual) order while simultaneously increasing the visibility of homosexual practices, identities, rhetorics and styles within a general economy of desire. Similarly, (and similarly simply put,) post-colonial theory—as represented by the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha—makes the point that the Home Office is nothing without empire, that the 'fixating' of the other works together with the disavowal of difference as the means for constructing marginality and insuring invisibility.

In terms of its function as a document of post-colonialism then, it is interesting to note that Syed's film was shot in the vicinity of the site of one of London's most dismal attempts to introduce mall culture to the old world, to replace the decaying aura of empire with the charisma of the hyperreal of late capitalism. The Cyprus Kebab House, the credits reveal, is located at Elephant and Castle—a tube station name which itself speaks volumes—where an economically lethargic, giant, bright pink shopping centre languishes.

Indirect commentary, suggestion and

The erotic 'matter' in pre-gay liberation representations sustained a sense of queerness that embraced not just representational characters but also images, figures, obscured objects and odd spaces.

abstract depiction are also the means for revealing queerness—not only in *Salamander*, but in Syed's other films as well. Although certain aspects of queer theory take such forms of expression into account, they are also likely, at times, to be seen as being at odds with queer political culture's hyper-investment in 'outness' and certain aspects of its understanding of representation which seem to have remained intact even though the notion of positive role models has been superseded by neo-professional badboy and badgirl identities.

At certain times, in many places, the experience of being 'out' is or has been inoperative, impossible or irrelevant. While the social and political realities of homophobia should not be minimized, it should be remembered that certain survival techniques and eccentric investments of those living in the 'closet' have fed into richly excessive and obsessive—often subterranean—aesthetic orientations. Sometimes, as in the work of Kenneth Anger or Jack Smith, certain kinds of visual lushness and certain forms of performance (i.e. camp and vamping) also become signs of a queer non-alignment with the narratives, values and assumptions of heteronormativity, of its binary regulations and demands for fixity. It would be a mistake therefore to interpret either the inarticulateness or theatricalization of the sexual or erotic in experimental work as necessarily the effect of shame or self-renunciation. Shielded, filtered or left unsaid, the erotic 'matter' in pre-gay liberation representations sustained a sense of queerness that embraced not just representational characters but also images, figures, obscured objects and odd spaces.

Salamander, like *Delilah* and *Chameleon*, creates an erotic conversation with the viewer. One part of this conversation is realized through a general sensuality that saturates each of the films' carefully constructed imaginary spaces. Another part—the core of that conversation perhaps—circulates around images of women

which speak of an obscure lesbian desire. Exploiting a number of existent, association-laden images such as long hair and leather jackets, a translucent empty dress and the sleeve of a white dress shirt, Syed asks the viewer to entertain these images in a way which is at once obsessive and casual. Each of these elements occur and recur in reference to the "external" codes of fetish and lesbian visibility (the received wisdoms of sexual subculture) as well as in relation to each other: that is, in terms of the overall structure of the film, the rhythm of the edits, the graphic values of the images.

For instance, the film *Delilah* begins with a slow pan up and then down the backlit jean-clad legs of a woman who, as the camera begins its second survey pulls her hands from between her legs as she swings her upper body forward and then back, hair streaming, light flashing. The first shot shows the figure as a kind of monument or monolith; the second reveals a kinetic aspect that, without erasing the first impression, provides a sense of agency. The vertical camera movements used throughout the film stage a number of repetitions of this gesture of disclosure, moving from arrest to action and back, encouraging both the transfixed gaze traditionally associated with voyeuristic appropriations of the fetish and a more active looking that is said to connect the viewer with his or her cinematic surrogate, the film's hero.

The terms of such an interpretation are supplied by feminist film theory's initial appropriations of psychoanalysis, terms which have since been widely circulated and elaborated and passionately upheld.⁴ The either/or of gendered desire results in the figure of the female continually reduced to the status of a fetish: object always. This creates obvious problems for using such terms to discuss desire

amongst women, in part because it suggests that only one of a lesbian duo retains a female (that is, passive or undesiring) psyche.

By beginning the films from somewhere on the sidelines of a story, from within a process of questioning which locates desire, not in a character who stands in for the subject, but in the whole scenario and in the relation between viewer and image, Syed's work dispenses with certain concerns about the eclipse of female desire within fetishization. By taking objectification—which is always implicit in the fetishization of body parts, of garments or of roles—as a given, the films not only show us how to look fetishistically, they also show how movement tempers the attachment represented by the fetish, indicating how the enactment of the fetish relation safeguards it from becoming pure abstraction or final fixation.

In psychoanalytic orthodoxy female fetishism is an oxymoron. This contention hinges on the assumption that the (often inanimate) part objects that make up the standard repertoire of fetish—or any of its more eccentric derivations—are used by the boy child to disavow the threat of castration. It follows that the girl, having nothing to lose, will not form the kinds of attachments through which disavowal is enacted. Recent revisions, however, suggest that fetishization is a way of coming to terms with individuation from the mother, a compensation of sorts, a way of securing connection after the loss of this most complete and incomparable original connection.⁵ From this vantage point the impossibility or low incidence of female fetishism suggests a damaged capacity for enacting desire.



Tariya Syed's Salamander

In *Delilah*, a series of repeated images of a leather-jacketed shoulder and arm arcing upward, a woman leaning forward and sweeping her long dark hair across her face and toward the camera, and an arm, clad in a white shirt, moving across the film frame are assembled and sequenced in a way which suggests that each enacts a kind of private ritual and, at the same time, represents a dramatic tension between the various figures or parts. Most of the gestures are athletic in some way, many suggestive of aggression or expressive of power: spinning, shadow-boxing, running and jumping, slashing the air. This choreography of restless attachments does little to construct a referential space or elaborate any discernible story. Instead, it fashions a symbolic space in which the viewer can delve into the processes of the obsession, affinity, and aggression. Thus, the film brings fetish back to its ambivalent origins and the anxieties suggested by its title which refers to a story of seduction and abandonment in which a hair fetish coincides with the suggestion of transvestitism.

Without taking up the question of masquerade or gender travesty in any detail, it is worth noting that the film *Chameleon* also expresses this interest in the erotic qualities of long hair; this time along side its 'study' of a filmy and malleable, uninhabited dress. As the earliest of

these three films, it can be thought of as initiating an ongoing exploration of the signs and codes of gendered identity: a concern that organizes not only much of the theoretical work on lesbian identity, but many of our everyday practices as well.

Throughout Syed's films the fetish images serve as a means for exploring identity and inciting exploration (an image from *Chameleon* of digging in the dirt comes to mind here). They are used in a way that draws attention to both the categories and the signs of identity and the movements around them. Each is a story of unarrested attachment: one that maintains a capacity for both mobility and attachment, that remains in the fray, in the places where things are never strictly one or the other—loving affinity or hostile rejection, butch or femme, story or abstraction. And this—as much as the allusions to girl-girl action—is where the queerness of this work inheres. If being queer is about 'setting closets on fire,' is it not in order to release their contents into the world? Is it not in order to learn how to embrace complicated understandings, experiences and identities, and about learning to live with and in this without having to practice indifference or resort to arresting the image's mediation of desire?

Notes

1 For an interesting discussion of Fredric Jameson's assertion that 'the visual is essentially pornographic' see Rey Chow's *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p28.

2 I use the masculine pronoun here because the phenomenon of 'flanerie' is traditionally seen as an exclusively male one.

3 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 4.

4 Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* is, of course, the 'seminal' text of this approach.

5 *The Modern Fetish* by Douglas Crimp (Artforum, Vol #) is an excellent application of these revisions to contemporary art practice.





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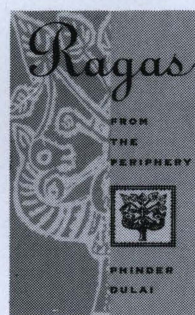
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Corporeality of Desire

Smaro Kamboureli reviews Shyam Selvadurai's phenomenally successful first novel, *Funny Boy*

Funny Boy is the first novel by Shyam Selvadurai, a young Sri Lankan-Canadian writer. Michael Ondaatje's photograph on the book's cover—a subtle gesture heralding Selvadurai's literary debut—is highly evocative. It is the image of a single bed empty but obviously slept in, for its sheets are wrinkled. A mosquito net is draped over it in such a way that we look at the bed through the soft pleats of the net's fabric. The overhead lamp inside the space framed by the net illuminates the room with a mellow amber light. It falls on the pillow still indented by the shape of the head of the person who is no longer there. We feel like voyeurs, complicit with the camera's angle. We know our gaze violates the privacy of this bedroom but we are not sure what intimacies or secrets we become privy to. Like much of Ondaatje's own work, the photograph exudes a keen sense of uncertainty, an uncertainty born of his crafty blend of romanticism and irony.

If I linger on the cover it is because the tensions it evokes announce, quietly, the volatile relationships that give this novel its impetus. The plot begins with the innocent play of children and ends with the Chelvaratnam family going to exile in Canada after the 1983 riots in Colombo. In between, we read about the reassuring power of familial bonds, misbegotten loves, gay desire; they all inform each other and take place against the spoken and unspoken histories of social and political conflicts in Sri Lanka. Unlike Ondaatje who approaches otherness through elaborate gestures of elision, Selvadurai confronts its many faces. The result is a realistic portrayal of characters whose bodies are inscribed by the tensions holding together, and apart, collective and personal yearnings.

Funny Boy is called 'a novel in six stories,' a rather accurate description, although much of the resonance and complexity of these narratives would dissipate were they to stand on their own as 'stories.' They are told from the point of view of Arjie, a young boy when the book opens, but well into adolescence after their house gets burned down by an angry mob of Sinhalese and his family decides to immigrate to Canada. The charm of these 'stories' has much to do with this child's perspective. *Funny Boy* is a classic example of a novel about a



photo: Karen Fernandez Photography

subject-in-formation, a narrative that follows the cultural education and sexual and racist awakening process of its child protagonist. We see Arjie, for example, receiving a 'lesson' from his father about racism and about the historic tensions between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, or from Daryl Brohier about the Burghers. These are 'lessons' delivered in response to Arjie's curiosity about things he fails to understand, but the answers he gets are also meant to fill in gaps in our knowledge of Sri Lanka's history and social realities. These instances of double-speaking, of addressing at once the protagonist and the reader are an effective narrative device, but one which is not always employed subtly enough. Often, the didacticism of these scenes is too pronounced, as it occurs while all action is suspended. Still, most of the narrative movements are executed deftly through Arjie's perspective.

As a first-person narrator, Arjie is ubiquitously present in the novel, but he also knows when to make himself invisible. During certain scenes involving adults, Arjie's point of view functions like that of a third-person voice, not because he wants to feign disinterestedness but because Selvadurai casts Arjie in the role of the best and most trustworthy ally adults in distress can find. Acting at once as their strong alibi and a silent witness, Arjie is present when Radha Aunty, a Tamil, has her clandestine meetings with Anil, the Sinhalese man in love with her. Radha Aunty admits she also loves him, but only after it becomes clear that the enmity between their ethnic communities cannot be overcome even by the force of love. This impossibility for love to grow across

**Why can't boys play with girls?
What's wrong with playing
with his mother's make-up
and jewellery?
Why can't he paint his nails
with red polish?**

ethnic and racial boundaries is one of the novel's central themes. Despite this, desire offers the only hope, indeed the only means, however precarious, of transgressing and negotiating those destructive boundaries. And this is where the poignancy of Selvadurai's novel lies.

The opening story establishes Arjie as the character most inclined to cross those boundaries, even though as a child he does not always understand why they have to be there in the first place. During 'spend-the-days,' the Sundays when his extended family gathers together in his grandparents' house, Arjie is the only boy in the family who does not play cricket with the male cousins in front of the house. He belongs to the territory called 'the girls,' the territory confined to the back garden and the kitchen porch. Arjie is there because the rules of the boys' game do not appeal to him; he opts, instead, for 'the free play of fantasy.' There, in front of the kitchen porch, his female cousins select him as their leader 'because of the force of [his] imagination,' and because of the game he has made up, 'bride-bride.' Indeed, he is 'the bestest of brides.' As Arjie tells us, "The dressing of the bride would now begin, and then, by the transfiguration I saw taking place in Janaki's full-length mirror... I was able to leave the constraints of myself and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self, a self to whom this day was dedicated... I was an icon, a graceful, benevolent, perfect being upon whom the adoring eyes of the world rested."

Play-acting and cross-dressing—it is by means of these performative acts—through sari and

funny boy

'Funny' signifies what society decides is queer-strange, unpredictable, unmanageable, ultimately threatening to the status quo.

veil, through rouge and lipstick, through kohl-accented eyes and a crown of flowers on the head—that Arjie's body reveals its otherness, that he learns the mysteries and power of transgression. Little Arjie delights in constructing a palimpsestic self, for his cross-dressing is at once the product of his rich imagination and an act of double mimicry, enacting as it does the ways in which 'the goddesses of the Sinhalese and Tamil cinema' represent the sexual and social codes of his culture. But it is not merely Arjie's childish and excessive romanticism that bride-bride represents. The game takes him a step ahead of himself, for it already embodies the script of his future self, his gay identity.

When another cousin, naughtily (but rightly so, I should add) nick-named Her Fatness, begins to covet Arjie's bride role, Arjie's play-acting ceases to be just that. Her Fatness, recently back from America, suspects his sexual otherness and, encouraged by some of the uncles and aunts, begins to call him names: pansy, faggot, girlie-boy, funny boy. It is in response to his family's fear that he might turn out to be 'funny,' a euphemism for being gay, in retaliation to their elaborate (and often comical) attempts to dissuade him from playing with the girls, that Arjie begins his relentless questioning of what is taken to be normative behaviour: why should he play cricket despite his hating it? Why can't boys play with girls? What's wrong with playing with his mother's make-up and jewellery? Why can't he paint his nails with red polish? The answers he receives to these why's vary, but they can be summed up by his Amma's reply: "Because the sky is so high and the pigs can't fly, that's why."

Perhaps it is because Arjie learns how aberrant logic can be while he is still very young that he becomes so adept at receiving what is 'other' to the norms of his immediate environment, ultimately at mediating difference. His bewilderment as to why he is not allowed to play bride-bride soon gives way to a bitterness and frustration that gradually reveal to him how similarly arbitrary other social and cultural codes can be. As the plot unfolds, Arjie's loss of innocence comes to represent the misplaced desires of adults like his mother, for example, desires that could have been fulfilled had she

been strong or fortunate enough to resist the long-established boundary lines of ethnicity and class. 'Funny,' Arjie discovers, signifies what society decides is queer-strange, unpredictable, unmanageable, ultimately threatening to the status quo. 'Funny,' as in 'funny life,' functions in the novel as a sign of difference and misunderstanding, of marginalisation and excess.

It doesn't then come as a surprise that, when Arjie's father places him in a private school in the hope that its strict discipline will make a 'man' out of him, Arjie befriends the only other marginal figure in his class: Shehan, a boy who dares to wear his hair longer than allowed and who, as rumours have it, has sex with the Head Prefect. Amidst the tough attitudes of the other boys, Arjie is grateful for Shehan's gentleness and the two become close friends. Their growing affection and love for each other culminates in a wonderfully intense scene that initiates Arjie into sexuality. Arjie and Shehan play hide-and-seek with Arjie's younger sister and her girlfriends. In the dark of the garage where they hide, the subliminal desires that have suffused Arjie's relationship with Shehan are finally released. Through a language that is delicately erotic, but which lacks the kind of sentimentalism that often accompanies the adolescent discovery of sex, Arjie describes their tentative movements, their charged emotions, the heightened sensitivity of their bodies. "The entire world," he says, "became the sensation in my mouth and Shehan's tongue probing, retreating, intertwining with mine." That they are almost found out by Sonali, the catcher of the game, that immediately after this sexual experience Arjie is agitated and feels as if he 'had committed a terrible crime against...the trust and love [his family] had given' him, is emblematic of how Arjie has internalised, to an extent, the 'straight' values of his society. He begins to understand that his coming to terms with his gay identity reinforces, instead of doing away with, his sense of responsibility toward his ethnic community, and more specifically his family.

From this climactic scene during which Arjie discovers the pleasure as the social perils that are to accompany him as a gay man, the narrative goes on to unravel the other central theme of the novel, that of racial tensions. The last

story, titled *Rio Journal: An Epilogue*, covers the last two months of the Chelvaratnam family's ambushed life in friends' houses and in their own during the Colombo riots in the summer of 1893. Arjie's diary entries record the wave of violence unleashed by the Sinhales against the Tamils which includes the burning of his grandparents in their car and the burning down of his own house. Arjie, like the rest of his family, no longer feels safe or at home in Sri Lanka. Indeed, as Arjie confesses to his diary, he 'will never feel safe again.' It is, then, all the more telling that it is during this period of anguish and loss that 'something occurred to [Arjie] that [he] had never really been conscious of before—Shehan was Sinhalese and [he] was not.' "This awareness," Arjie admits, "did not change my feelings for him, it was simply there, like a thin translucent screen through which I watched him."

Selvadurai has written an intriguing and moving novel about difficult—all the more so because current—issues that divide families, that can threaten to destroy national states. Although his characters are confronted with the social difficulties that revolve around gay identity and the ethical and ideological questions raised by what Paul Gilroy calls 'ethnic absolutism,' Selvadurai, wisely, avoids moralising about their dilemmas. This is a refreshing, indeed an honest, way of writing about such politically volatile issues. The story Selvadurai tells so compellingly speaks of contesting desires, of the need to understand identity as a process that constantly demands negotiation. Be it a negotiation of the cultural values invested in girls' play and boys' games, of strong-headed mothers and emancipated daughters, of the nationalist struggles between Tamils and Sinhalese, or of gay versus heterosexual relationships—this process is dramatised in the novel through the corporeality of desire. For this, and for the humour and compassion that its narrator Arjie displays, *Funny Boy* is a deeply satisfying novel.



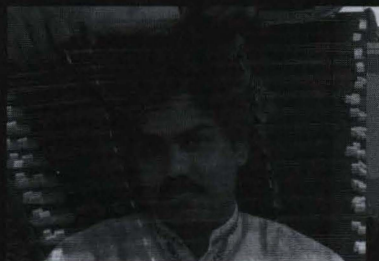
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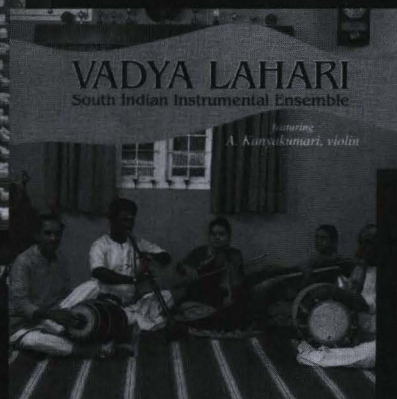


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Canada

CALGARY Of Colour: Lesbians & Gay Men of Colour and others c/o Gay Lines Calgary #201, 223-12th Avenue SW, Calgary Alberta T2R 0G9. Kevin (403) 234-8973.

TORONTO Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention 399 Church Street, 3rd floor, Toronto, Ontario. Tel (416) 351-0131.

TORONTO Khush: South Asian Gay Men Box 6172, Station A, Toronto, Ontario M5W 1P6. Khush Hotline (416) 925-XTRA, extension 2173.

VANCOUVER Atish: HIV/AIDS Project For the South Asian and Iranian communities. Languages spoken: Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu. Pacific AIDS Resource Centre, 1107 Seymour Street, Vancouver BC V6B 5S8

VANCOUVER Atish Network Society For gay men, lesbians and bisexuals for South Asian and Middle Eastern communities. Box 345 - 1027 Davie Street, Vancouver, BC V6E 4L2. More info on Atish, contact *al-Qamar Sangha* Phone/Fax (604) 528-9275.

New Zealand

AUCKLAND Mastana c/o Auckland University Students' Association, Box 92019, Taamaki Makau Rau (Auckland), 1000, Aotearoa (New Zealand).

United Kingdom

LONDON Naz Project South Asian health organisation. Palingswick House, 241 King Street, London W6 9LP. Tel (081) 563-0191.

LONDON Shakti South Asian Lesbian and Gay Network. BM Box 4390, London WC1N 3XX. Tel (01) 993-9001 weekends.

India

BOMBAY Bombay Dost For gay men and lesbians. 105A Veena Beena Shopping Centre, opposite Bandra Station, Bandra (W), Bombay 400 050.

BOMBAY Khush Club For gay men and lesbians. Box 57351, Bombay 400 058.

CALCUTTA Counsel Club For gay men, lesbians and bisexuals. Annual membership of Rs200/\$10 gets you Pravartak subscription, pen pal listing, access to archives, counselling help. c/o Pawan, Post Bag 10237, Calcutta 700 019.

COCHIN Nikhil, Men India Movement Box 885, Cochin 682 005.

DELHI Arambh Support Group For gay men and lesbians. Box 9522, Delhi 110 095.

DELHI Naz Project (India) Trust South Asian health organisation. D-45 Gulmohar Park, Delhi 110 049. Anjali Gopalan (11) 667-328.

LUCKNOW Friends India For men who love men. Box 59, Mahanagar, Lucknow 226 006.

MADRAS Sisters For polycultural lesbians. Box 26, Tambaram, Madras 600 059.

NEW DELHI AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan Community work in issues of education, health, law, women, gay men and lesbians, professional blood donors, and drug abusers. Box 5308, New Delhi 110 053.

NEW DELHI Sakhi For lesbians. Box 3526, Lajpat Nagar, New Delhi 110 024.

SECUNDERABAD Gay Information Centre c/o Owais, Box 1662, Secunderabad HPO, AP 500 003.

United States

ATLANTA Trikone-Atlanta For gay men and lesbians. Box 18638, Atlanta, GA 31126-0638. Mehboob (404) 892-0475 or Svati (404) 373-8915.

CHICAGO Sangat For gay men and lesbians. Box 268463, Chicago, IL 60626. Viru or Ifti (312) 506-8810, Fax (312) 784-0148.

LOS ANGELES Trikone-Los Angeles For gay men and lesbians. c/o The Center, Admin Box 400, 1625 Schrader Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90028. Tel (213) 993-7626.

NEW YORK South Asian Lesbian & Gay Assn (SALGA) Box 902, New York, NY 10009-0902. Tel (212) 909-9081.

NEWPORT BEACH Snehi A worldwide support group for mature gay and lesbian South Asians and friends, send SASE for sample newsletter. Box 15943, Newport Beach, CA 92659.

PHILADELPHIA SALGA-Philadelphia For gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender South Asians. Kevin (215) 735-5114.

SAN FRANCISCO Sadhana Brothers For gay men interested in Hindu spirituality. c/o Ed Brophy, 4211 South 23rd Street, San Francisco, CA 94114. Tel (415) 647-4388.

SAN FRANCISCO Shamakami South Asian lesbian and bisexual women. Box 460456, San Francisco, CA 94146.

SAN JOSE Trikone For lesbians and gay men. Box 21354, San Jose, California USA 95151-1354. Tel (408) 270-8776 Fax (408) 274-2733. email trikone@rahul.net

WASHINGTON, DC Khush-DC For gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Box 53149, Temple Heights Station, Washington, DC 20009.

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