Loving India: Same-Sex Desire, Hinduism and the Nation-State in Abha Dawesar's *Babyji*

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Abstract When Abha Dawesar's second novel *Babyji* was published in 2005, it was celebrated for its joyous depiction of love and sex between women. What has passed largely unnoticed, however, is the ways in which its representation of same-sex love is intimately tied to discourses of power. From the name of the main character, Anamika (which is also the name of an early South Asian lesbian organization), to the nickname of her first female lover, India, to that of her lower caste lover, Rani (queen), the novel maps networks of relations that simultaneously challenge and reinforce the regimes of truth intrinsic to Hinduism, class hierarchies, caste divisions and, indeed, the Indian nation-state. Such networks of sexual and romantic relation are also common to Dawesar's other novels, *Miniplanner* (2000) and *That Summer in Paris* (2006). Drawing on the work of Ruth Vanita, Suparna Bhaskaran, Alison Donnell, and others, this paper will argue that Dawesar's neglected oeuvre challenges both the often tragic arc of narratives depicting same-sex attraction set in the Indian subcontinent, and the Eurocentric trajectory of much contemporary theory and creative writing which privileges the diaspora as a place of liberation for South Asian queers. Instead, *Babyji* in particular queers the Indian nation (in Eve Kosofky Sedgwick's sense) and invites a Khush-centered, situated, reading practice.
Key Words Kama Sutra; queer; Indian nationalism; lesbians in fiction

Abha Dawesar's *Babyji* (2005) opens with the eponymous protagonist, a sixteen-year old upper class Delhi girl, recounting her reading habits, and with them, a transition from (sexual) innocence to experience:

> I used to be innocent, driven solely by the ambition to do something great for my country….My knowledge of the facts of life was based entirely on books, and clean ones at that. I read nineteenth-century classics by George Eliot and Emily Brontë. These books never went into any details. To remedy this I decided to

> read Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*….The *Kamasutra* that I force-fed myself seemed completely of another world, alien and absurd. After I read it, however, magical things started to happen. In particular, I met a woman. (1)

From the outset, *Babyji* positions the Indian classic, *Kamasutra*, as a corrective to the colonial legacy of English — and heteronormative sexuality — in India. Best known in the West as a (heterosexual) sex manual, and in India as a book of etiquette, I argue that in Dawesar's novel the *Kamasutra* becomes a source of distinctly Indian queerness, that both radically territorializes love and sex between women, and challenges dominant gay rights narratives that imagine queer liberation emanating from the West (see Ara Wilson, for example). In so doing, the novel maps networks of relations that simultaneously challenge and reinforce the regimes of truth intrinsic to Hinduism, class hierarchies, caste divisions and, indeed, the Indian nation-state.

I will begin by focusing on the *Kamasutra*'s treatment of women's sexualities at some length, because much contemporary South Asian discourse continues to construct same-sex love as a Western import. When love between women is imagined, it is too often portrayed as doomed (as in Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* and Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*), or possible only in the diaspora (as in the novels of Shamim Sarif). The protagonist's reading of the *Kamasutra*, therefore, not only provides her with instruction in sexual and romantic relations, but provides a decidedly South Asian lineage to her own emerging queerness. The novel's repeated references to the Mandal commission and the high profile self-immolation by a Delhi student that followed its recommendation that caste reservations be adopted at all levels of the education system places the events of the text in the fall of 1990 (Chandra et al 367). Anamika's emerging queerness, and the fissures in the fabric of the Indian nation — made evident both in the Mandal Commission report and in the response to it — are intimately linked. As Gayatri Gopinath argues in *Impossible Desires*,"[q]ueer desire does not transcend or remain peripheral to…histories [of racism and colonialism] but instead becomes central to their telling and remembering: there is no queer desire without these histories, nor can these histories be told or remembered without simultaneously revealing an erotics of power" (2). India's entrenched caste hierarchies are the product of both colonialism and its indigenous Sanskritic heritage; these generate a "politics of truth" that, at the opening of the novel enable Anamika — already head girl at her private school — to imagine herself as capable of greatness, and to cast the nation as an appropriate object for her heroism (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 132). It is through the protagonist's queer desires, and the intimate relations these bring about, that *Babyji* that these regimes of truth begin to unravel, and with them easy truths about both sexual and national identities.

The extent to which the *Kamasutra* represents or endorses love and sex between women remains a subject of scholarly debate. Alain Danielou's 2011 translation, for instance, depicts a woman penetrating her female lover with a dildo in the section on "Virile Behaviour in Women." In Danielou's translation, a variety of woman exists who prefers to make "love to her own kind." Such a woman has a unique label, "svairini," which Danielou alternately translates as "homophile" and "lesbian" (171). His version further emphasizes that "such practices are not forbidden" (172). Walter Penrose utilizes Danielou's translation in his own work and appears to believe it correct. Wendy Doniger, on the other hand, is critical nearly to the point of scorn, maintaining that Danielou has mistaken a lesbian for a "loose" woman and that the svairini is, in fact, anally penetrating a man rather than having sex with another woman (30). Doniger's own 2002 translation reflects these differences in opinion. The issue is further complicated by the fact that, as Giti Thadani points out, in Hindi this same term is used both for a woman who is "wanton" and who experiences sexual desire "like a man" (77). I do not propose to attempt a resolution of this debate. No version of the *Kamasutra* can make any straightforward claims to authenticity, not only due to the inherent problems associated with the translation of any ancient text, but because the *Kamasutra* as we now know it was edited and compiled by the orientalist Richard Burton; "the original quite literally came into being for the purpose of translation" and represents an amalgamation of diverse texts (Puri 615). Vatsyayana's writings on love and sex certainly existed before Burton's intervention, but not usually as a single compendium, and there is uncertainty as to what, if anything, Burton may have omitted in his act of codification.

Regardless of the version one prefers, however, the *Kamasutra* remains an important South Asian text for thinking queerness and its history on the subcontinent. Even Doniger's reading translates the *Kamasutra* as a text where a woman may play "the role of the man," engage in oral sex (28), and where a third gender might exist (though, for Doniger this gender seems to be available only to those sexed male) (27). Walter Penrose goes much further, examining the diverse third gender positions available to women in ancient, medieval and early modern India in considerable detail, and leaves little doubt that, at least sometimes, the occupation of those roles provided opportunities for, and/or coincided with, sexual relationships between women. Indrani Chatterjee comes to a similar conclusion, and notes that prior to the eighteenth century, Indian culture in general was more interested in regulating sexual acts with regard to the relative social standing of their participants rather than with respect to their gender (68). Engaging in sex with one's own sex, or the opposite sex, were not seen as mutually exclusive alternatives. Jyoti Puri notes that the *Kamasutra* also mentions sexual relations between upper class women and their female servants

(618). Even S.C. Uphadyaya's later translation, which seeks to distance itself from the history of sex between women in India (emphasizing its location in the harem and the absence of virile men, deleting all mention of female genitalia), cannot entirely rid the *Kamasutra* of its queer potential (Puri 625).

As such, despite both the critical uncertainty around the *Kamasutra*, and the fact that its treatment of queerness is equivocal, focusing on the *Kamasutra* challenges dominant theoretical approaches to sexuality in the West, particularly Michel Foucault's seminal tripartite work *The History of Sexuality*. If Michel Foucault has achieved a central, if contested place in contemporary queer scholarship in the West, as David M. Halperin demonstrates at length in *Saint Foucault* (1995), his legacy is also decidedly Eurocentric, and at times, orientalist, particularly given his assertion in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* that India (and other eastern locales) possess a pleasure-oriented "*ars erotica*" (57; italics in original) which contrasts with the "*scientia sexualis*" (58; italics in original) of the west. Michael J. Sweet argues that Foucault's approach to non-Western sexuality not only demonstrates that he "was prey to the same fantasies of Oriental licentiousness that afflicted his predecessors almost a century before" (79) but is also a reminder of the ability even of great thinkers to be "spectacularly wrong" (80).

In 1990, when *Babyji* is set, S.C. Upadhyaya's translation, first published in 1961, was the most widely circulating edition of the *Kamasutra* within the English-speaking Indian middle classes (Puri 607). Puri argues that Uphadyaya's translation, whose introduction emphasizes its supposed objectivity and neutrality, "can be considered part of the counterhegemonic, nationalist legacy that sought to destabilize the hierarchies of colonial rule by foregrounding the discourse of science" (625). There is therefore an irony in Anamika's reappropriation of his text for her own, queer purposes, as the novel's protagonist is nothing if not scientifically minded, and frequently uses tropes from physics and chemistry to imagine her interpersonal relationships (13). Uphadyaya's preface states that his rendition of the *Kamasutra* "aims at teaching a person the best method to control and properly guide the desires, particularly the sexual urge, so that the person may be an useful member of the family, society and his country and contribute his mite to their welfare by his way of life" (qtd. in Puri 631). The link between sexuality and nationalism could hardly be made more explicit. That reading the *Kamasutra* sets Anamika on a path of both queerness and, potentially, diasporic life, suggests a counterhegemonic practice that calls into question the truths of that document.

Though *Babyji* won a Lambda Literary Award and a Stonewall Book Award, and was well reviewed both inside and outside India, critical attention to the novel has been scant, and has repeatedly resisted its embrace of queerness per se. Tank Nayan,

for instance, insists that Anamika "favours lesbian relationship in order to express her anger against male-dominance and patriarchal society" and that her same-sex desires are merely "a reaction against man [sic]" (197). Nayan points to the fact that Anamika also appears to enjoy kissing a man at one point during the novel as evidence for the supposedly purely instrumental quality of her queer romantic and sexual relations. For Vanessa Guignery, *Babyji* depicts "a contemporary Indian Sentimental Education" only "tinged with female homosexuality" (309), and understands the novel primarily in terms of a broader interest in borders, boundaries and classification, rather than invested in queerness per se. Guignery is right to point out, of course, that Anamika "upsets gender, class and caste boundaries" (310). Even Sara Ahmed, whose analysis of the novel, though brief, is far more nuanced, argues in *The Promise of Happiness*, that the protagonist's "lesbian desire, emerging from Anamika's initial vow of revenge against middle-class morality, becomes a deeply pedagogical act" (154). While I agree that Anamika's sexual relationships are inextricably tied to her more general coming of age — *Babyji* is very much a bildungsroman — the novel also projects queer life forward into the future, particularly in Anamika's sighting of a gay male couple with a baby in its final pages (323).

If the novel's opening page emphasizes that Anamika's queer desire is not a product of Western influence (but opposed to it), what is equally clear is that queer desire is also juxtaposed with naïve nationalism. Anamika's coming of age is arguably not just about her sexual awakening, but a political awakening, that requires her to disavow her simplistic desire "to do something great" (1) for India, while struggling with the complexity of attempting to be loyal to a country whose structures of privilege have both benefitted and confined her. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the woman whom the narrator meets on that opening page is nicknamed India by Anamika. Jessica Gokhberg agrees, stating, "*Babyji* presents lesbian desire as an end beyond the self, a mimetic discourse of Indian nationalism that revisions national identity as a larger hegemonic force beyond any single self, but that can be identified only as the self sees it; each self, each individual desire contributes to the wider 'suprapersonal' nature of identity" (97). India (the person) immediately challenges what Anamika claims to know about Indians: "[w]e are a nation of taxonomists…it was natural for me to classify people at first sight" (5-6). Yet the object of Anamika's desire resists classification, a fact that simultaneously threatens and intrigues her.

Names are both significant and a challenge in this novel. To this point, I have referred to Anamika as queer, but she herself does not use this, or any other term, to describe her own sexuality or gender. She asks other characters at various points if women can be gay or homosexual (97), but never explicitly states whether she is considering such a label for herself. I use 'queer' here, conscious of its limitations,

because as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains in *Tendencies*, it means "across….its roots are "Indo-European" and it is both "antiseparatist" and "antiassimilationist;" "it is relational, and strange" (xii). The fact that Anamika's desires are both associated with and threatening to the nation, and are associated with resistance to classification makes queer the term that best captures the ways in which the sexual, ontological and epistemological are interlinked in *Babyji*.

The main character's nickname, Babyji (from which the novel's title derives), is given to her by Rani, who is both servant and lover. It evokes the ambiguity of Anamika's status and her uneasy relationship to gender and class privilege. At once a diminutive (as indicated by the incorporation of 'baby') and a term of respect and deference, (as indicated by the suffix –ji), the name points to the fact that Rani is older and more experienced than Anamika (sexually and otherwise) yet of a lower class and caste (hence her role as servant). It also performs Anamika's cultural hybridity in its yoking of Hindi and English. The moniker is indicative of the ambiguity around Anamika's gender, since the first and second half of her nickname are gendered female and male, respectively. Tripta's young son expresses overt uncertainty about her gender, asking her if she is to be addressed as a didi (older sister) or bhaiyya (older brother) (93), and Anamika often identifies with or imagines herself in male roles. Yet she does not identify as male; instead, in the spirit of the *Kamasutra*, she experiences desires that are akin to those normatively associated with (heterosexual) men.

Rani and Anamika's relationship evokes an extant, if covert, tradition of figuring sex between female masters and servants in Indian literature. The best known example is arguably Ismat Chugtai's short story "Lihaf [The Quilt]," written in Urdu, which Gayatri Gopinath discusses at some length. As she points out, that story "must be understood not as a representative 'lesbian' narrative but through the very structures set up by the story itself; these demand that female homoeroticism be located as simply one form of desire within a web of multiple, competing desires that are in turn embedded in different economies of work and pleasure" (145), which also, Gopinath argues, challenges normative depictions of subalterity (148). The feminized domestic space in which "Lihaf" is set is one of both labour and sexuality, and the two cannot be disentangled either in that text, or in *Babyji*.

Walter Penrose maintains that the practice of secluding women into a zenana or harem, practiced by upper class Muslims and Hindus alike, and depicted in "Lihaf," created opportunities for precisely these sorts of homoerotic relationships, and that, as the illustrations he draws on make clear, were not entirely unknown prior to the twentieth century (23-25). The *Kamasutra* itself notes that when polygamy is practiced, women are likely to remain sexually unsatisfied, and therefore "obtain satisfaction amongst themselves" (qtd. in Penrose 23). Suparna Bhaskaran recounts

how erotic practices between women often continue to be viewed as compatible with, rather than as a challenge to, normative Indian practices of homosociality (138). At the same time, as Gopinath argues, "the slide from female homosociality to female homoeroticism serves to locate female same-sex desire and pleasure firmly within the confines of the home and 'the domestic,' rather than a safe 'elsewhere'" (153). The homosociality of the Indian private sphere can therefore render queer desire simultaneously more and less threatening to the nation-state.

If Chugtai's story hinges on the unspeakable and uncertain nature of the activity that unites the two women beneath the titular quilt, however, *Babyji* makes sex between women an explicit and unmistakable centre of the story. Indeed, sex performs a variety of functions. If sex with India provides Anamika with opportunities for both education and pleasure, sex with Sheela and Rani provides uncomfortable insights into the workings of power — both inside and outside the domestic spheres. The locations where sexual activities occurs in the novel — Anamika's childhood bedroom, Sheela's childhood bedroom, India's bedroom — not only domesticate queerness, as Gopinath indicates, but call into question the site of the middle-class family home as a sanctified space that in Indian nationalist ideology is supposed to both epitomize, yet remain separate from, the public space of the nation (see Chatterjee). Anamika herself sees families like hers as "the moral fiber of society" (11), and the ethical quandaries that Anamika faces call into question not only her personal morality, but that of the nation as a whole.

Rani repeatedly reveals aspects of herself that unsettle Anamika and challenge the protagonist's understanding of the servant, and of their relationship. Rani's given name, Basanti, is revealed quite late in the novel and at India's, rather than Anamika's request (143). Anamika is also unsettled by Rani's knowledge of English (63), lack of bodily shame (10), and the fact that her family of origin had indoor plumbing and running water in their home (63). The moniker Rani, commonly used with servants in place of their given names (16), both serves to incorporate Basanti into the fabric of nation, while also erasing her individual identity. There is a clear irony in making Rani (which means queen) the normative title for women whose class and caste mark them as subordinate. Yet Anamika tries to break away from treating Rani like a servant (30), albeit with limited success (44). Rather, it is Rani who "stared at the chasm that separated my higher birth from her lower one and hopped right over it" (15).

This tendency to erase others' identities through her happy ignorance of their given names also extends to India, whose given name is actually Tripta (which means satisfaction). Instead, of speculating or asking about Tripta's history or identity, however, Anamika states:

> I drew maps of India and wrote India in the center. I anthropomorphized the map by adding curls on the states of Gujarat and West Bengal. I imagined India's body and the map of the country liquefying the boundaries between various states so that they could overlap…I added two breasts in the bang centre of the map. (43)

This sexualizing of the map of India not only recalls the work of painter M.F. Hussain, but enacts a queer fantasy of the nation. Mother India, so iconic in Indian nationalist writing, film and visual arts, is here made an innately and necessarily queer figure; to love the nation as a loyal female citizen is not, as Gandhi proposed, to renounce the domestic (and with it, sexuality) (see Partha Chatterjee), but to sexualize and render queer both the home and the homeland.

Anamika means ring finger, suggesting the ways in which Anamika's actions are also a queered performance of heterosexual marriage. Indeed, she becomes jealous when she learns that Rani continues to have sex with her husband. Anamika imagines her love life in terms of Draupadi's relationship with Arjuna and his brothers (51). She further believes that her same-sex attractions are innate (139) and grounded in the physical (117), angrily rejecting Adit's charge that her affairs represent a "phase" that will come to an end with her inevitable heterosexual marriage. But his rejection of Anamika's claim to have raped Sheela, after the former digitally penetrates the latter despite her protestation, is also a disavowal of the possibility of sex between women (213). Indeed, Anamika's violation of Sheela is inextricably linked to her fantasy in which the two grow up and marry, with Sheela adopting the role of a stereotypical Indian wife (107).

All of Anamika's most morally problematic actions occur while she is cast in a more masculine role, as Hindi film hero (12), Bollywood villain (179) or Rock Hudson (17). Indeed, she enjoys Tripta's son's uncertainty around her gender, and repeatedly chooses clothes she believes help her appear boyish, as well as mens' cologne (8). For this reason, Sridevi K. Nair argues that *Babyji* as a bildungsroman maps Anamika's achievement of masculine adulthood and that even her rapture over meeting India "mimics male nationalism, especially the importance attached to woman's procreative power and the idea of an 'essence' that is exclusive to womanhood, which is deployed to maintain gender roles under the guise of the 'reverence' accorded women because they are 'maternal'" (149). Indeed, Anamika recoils when she learns that Tripta also understands the world in scientific terms, including taking an interest in the role of the hormone oxytocin in sexual arousal, as well as breastfeeding and maternal bonding. Anamika considers the mother-child bond "sacred;" and begins to wonder if Tripta is "pathological" (245).

It is here that the novel also points out the limitations of the Indian traditions

of queerness as epitomized in the *Kamasutra*, from which Anamika draws. While Wendy Doniger refutes the argument that the *Kamasutra* centres on the domination of women, she nevertheless views the forms of female power enunciated within it as "fragile" (22). Indeed, as Jyoti Puri makes clear, the history of the *Kamasutra* when read from a "transnational feminist perspective" refuses and cannot be contained by the "categories of past and present, of "India" and the "West," or tradition and modernization-Westernization" (634). All of the extant translations remain "trapped within an unexamined nexus of power" (Puri 635). Yet it equally seems as though few alternatives are to available to Anamika — her best friend's father and would-be lover gives her a copy of *Lolita* and tries to cast her as its titular character, but Anamika would rather be Humbert (223). Neither option seems very promising.

Therefore, her reading of the *Kamasutra* can only be the beginning of Anamika's sexual — and political — education. The doctor who comes to Anamika's school in order to provide sex education to the pupils is another important touchstone. She acknowledges both that sex between women is possible and that homosexuality exists in India (98). Sridevi K. Nair's complaint that the novel's depiction of school-based sex education is unrealistic — that no physician would have openly acknowledged the possibility of homosexuality in a Delhi private school in the late 1980s (165-166) — fails to acknowledge the fact that queer sexualities were becoming increasingly visible in Delhi during this period, and not only because of the publicity afforded to Western celebrities such as Rock Hudson (referenced by Anamika in the novel (96)). Paola Bacchetta recounts several high profile suicides among lesbian couples between 1979 and 1990. While "[t]he press produced these women as tragic, dangerous, or simply unintelligible," many Indians queers and nascent gay rights organizations used the publicity to initiate dialogue around their experiences (Bacchetta 958). Bacchetta also recounts three marriages between women that occurred in the region around Delhi between 1987 and 1989, all of which also received media attention (ibid). While the outcomes varied — one of the marriages described was treated in the media as an asexual solemnizing of friendship, another was annulled by the father of one of the women under section 377 of the Indian penal code — all of these events point to the ways in which love and sex between women was not entirely unknown in popular Indian discourses, and were sometimes quite clearly labeled as lesbian (Thadani 103-4).

Shohini Ghosh points out that while female homoeroticism has been much less frequently depicted in Bollywood cinema than male homoeroticism, it is not totally absent (210). Carla Petievich also documents how rekhti poetry written in Urdu, though written by men, developed a female voice used to express attraction to and desire for females. Though in the twentieth-century rekhti poetry became

a "marginalized" body of literature (51), Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai have exhaustively documented in their anthology *Same-Sex Love in India* (2000) that homoeroticism continued to appear in the literature of every Indian language.

Sridevi Nair argues further that Adit's calm reception of the news of Anamika's affairs reflects the fact of his cosmopolitanism (163). This claim is not, however, borne out either by sociological information around queer South Asian lives or by Adit's negative response to Anamika's report of encountering two gay men raising a child (332). As Suparna Bhaskaran reveals in her extensive catalogue of interviews, Indian parents of queer girls and women respond to the revelation of their childrens' sexualities in diverse ways; greater westernization or exposure to the West does not guarantee a diminshment of homophobia, and indeed, can sometimes incur the reverse. Furthermore, Bhaskaran's interviewees also recount occasions in which friends of a young couple helped the lovers meet in secret and to protect these teenagers from the wrath of their own parents (Bhaskaran 139).

The "theme that lesbianism is not Indian" occurs in late twentieth and twenty-first century India as a response not to the queer rights movement in the west, but in response to the media frenzy surrounding these local events — which involved predominantly lower class Hindu women (Bacchetta 958). Indeed, media reporting which claimed that "lesbianism in not India" was also met by letters to the editor refusing the equivalence between queerness and the west. It is worth noting that at least two of the marriage ceremonies described were decidedly "Indian" in their content. Bacchetta notes one instance in which two women were married by a Hindu priest. Giti Thadani, who examines the reporting around one of the marriages in more detail, notes another couple participated in a traditional Gujrati ceremony that solemnizes friendship between women and also has an "erotic element" (108). She notes, however, that this traditional rite is "no longer positively regarded" in the tribal communities where it originated, and that many tribal women have now converted to Christianity (ibid). That same-sex marriages occurred in independent India as early as 1979 should perhaps not be surprising. Ruth Vanita's *Love's Rite* (2005) recounts a variety of traditional forms of same-sex union, some specifically involving two women. As Partha Chatterjee notes, Indian nationalism constructed a new nationalist patriarchy dominated by upper and middle class caste Hindus via "a system of exclusions" which simultaneously modernized and closely regulated women's sexualities (164-165). These marriages, and the associated media outcry, map a struggle between contesting truths within India on the terrain of Hindu hegemony.

Furthermore, the period depicted in the novel was a major organizational and activist period for the gay rights movement in India. India's first major queer magazine, *Bombay Dost*, began publication in 1990; Sakhi, India's first lesbian

collective, was founded that same year. These two events were not spontaneous ruptures, but emerged from years of earlier activism and coalition building via organizations such as the Red Rose Rendezvous Group, active in Delhi during the 1980s, and the Indian Women's Movement, which was founded in 1979 (see Bacchetta). In the West, specifically South Asian queer groups were emerging at much the same time. In the United States, for instance, a lesbian collective entitled Anamika began in 1985. It may not be a coincidence that Dawesar's protagonist has the same name. Nayan Shah points out that the word anamika derives from the Sanskrit and means "nameless" which was intended to "address the dearth of names in South Asian languages for relationships between two women" (142). In fact, a variety of South Asian words have been used to designate women who love other women, such as sakhi and yuvati (words that arguably had sexual connotation in the original Sanskrit) (see Thadani).

Khush is sometimes used for queer men and women in South Asia, and means happy. Though the novel does not use the term, happiness is one if its central themes. As Sara Ahmed argues, *Babyji* presents a distinctly queer take on happiness. Indeed, queerness gets in the way of Anamika's aspirations for a good and happy life as conventionally understood (Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* 120). Instead, Anamika "refuses to give happiness the power to secure a specific image of what would count as a good life, or of what she can give" (Ahmed, "Happiness and Queer Politics" 15). Indeed, the realization and fulfillment of Anamika's queer desires is not isomorphic with her happiness. To be clear, these desires do not, in and of themselves, produce unhappiness. But in the course of exploring these desires Anamika is forced, rather uncomfortably, to confront her own sexual inexperience, her own ego, her previously unexamined caste and class privilege, and her own varied prejudices. These overtake, at least in her own mind, the more conventional aspects of her life that ought to be normative sources of happiness — her academic and athletic achievements, loving family and supportive friendships. When she converses with the US college recruiter towards the end of the novels, who praises her involvement in extracurricular activities, Anamika can think only of her entanglements with her various lovers (354).

It is heterosexuality in *Babyji* that is repeatedly cast as foreign and threatening. At best, it is associated with a kind of ancient duty, which, as Anamika's mother argues, leaves little room for a "joyful life" (176). Instead, heterosexuality is associated with violence and with ugliness. When Anamika catches a glimpse of a pornographic German magazine that has surreptitiously been circulating among her classmates, she finds most of the models unattractive, and compares them negatively to her three real-life lovers: India, Rani and Sheela. Even male classmates can be threatening. A used condom is left on Sheela's desk at school; Anamika isn't even sure what it is, but

understands that its presence is an act of violation (309).

Chakra Dev, with whom Anamika has a complex relationship, is accused of provocatively leaving the condom there; certainly, he engages in other sexual transgressions in the novel, including drunkenly phoning Anamika to talk about his sexual fantasies and activities. A lower caste Hindu, Chakra Dev is socially excluded at the their elite Delhi school, and also seen as "overdeveloped" because he shaves and has other physical attributes suggestive of adult masculinity (73). He interrupts the relationship between Sheela and Anamika, both via his insistent heterosexual desires for Sheela, and by quite literally walking in on them (128). But he also challenges her claim to knowledge of the nation; Anamika has known him for some time without understanding that his name connotes a 'backward caste' yet she has implicitly understood him in caste terms, claiming "he had been born a complete hoodlum with an antisocial gene, just as I had been born with a gene that preferred Sheela's smoothness to Vidur's hairiness" (139). This initial assessment, though it superficially clears space for queer identities, also reveals the limits of an identity-oriented approach.

Sheela's name means modest or good, and it is she whose relationship to queerness is most uncertain in this text. Whereas Rani openly declares that she prefers to have sex with Anamika than her husband (and indeed even receives a beating for refusing him), Sheela sees her relationship with Anamika as a prelude to heterosexual marriage, not an alternative to it. Sheela's experiences of heterosexuality are virtually isomorphic with her experiences of sexual violence, from constant catcalls (76), to being sexually assaulted on a crowded public bus (78). In contrast, Anamika offers her a certain kind of freedom, albeit one decidedly associated with class, as indicated when Anamika takes her horseback riding (45). It is perhaps no surprise that it is to Sheela, who comes closest to epitomizing an Indian feminine ideal (one Anamika recognizes as such), that Anamika confesses the intertwining of her sexual and national desires in a letter:

> I didn't distinguish clearly between India, my motherland, and India, my lover. I could not distinguish between my motherland and my mother. I talked about making love to the country and achieving a mystical communion with the land, its riverbeds and plateaus. (241-242)

Here, the orgasmic queer communion with the nation precipitated when Anamika first meets Tripta is repeated, but with a difference. Anamika no longer experiences queer desire as an alternative to, or superimposition onto, knowledge of and loyalty to the nation. Instead, she is overtly conscious of same-sex desire as a path to national

insight, one that defies the classificatory impulse that shaped her relationship to Indianness earlier in the text.

When all Delhi schools are closed in the wake of a student's self-immolation (intended as a protest agains the implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendations), Anamika begins to reflect more deeply on the nation and on her own gender: "[f]eelings of shame at being a Hindu in 1984 mixed with feelings of shame for having forced myself on Sheela" (217). The moment when Anamika is finally able to understand — and critique — her own violation of Sheela, coincides with her sudden insight into partition, and the communal violence which has plagued India since (265). It is after renouncing this masculine, and nationalist, prerogative that she becomes more comfortable with her own same-sex relationships, and holds hands in public with Rani for the first time (329). This act reconfigures the very public space through which the women walk, and the streets "seemed new" as if Anamika "had never walked on them" (ibid). Therefore, queer liberation in the novel is associated with public space — but without the need to come out per se. Indeed, neither Rani nor Anamika can truthfully be said to be in the closet; Rani moons Anamika on the street at their first meeting. At the same time, Anamika comes to new sympathy for Chakra Dev. Her wish to see him remain in their school and even have the opportunity to speak to Sheela, the object of his desire, is directly related to her deepening understanding of queerness, not least because it is Rani who critiques Anamika for her use of derogatory casteist terms to describe her classmate (349). She begins to realize that embracing her own sexuality means understanding that "life itself…had arisen from disorder" (350), and that she needs to engage with Chakra Dev — and his disordering presence — in order to be a better person. This is a far cry from the commitment to classification that marks Indianness for Anamika at the beginning of the novel.

As Gayatri Gopinath argues, "one of the central tenets of Hindu nationalist ideology is the assignation of deviant sexualities and genders to all those who inhabit the boundaries of the Hindu nation, particularly Indian Muslims" (17). In *Babyji*, it is Chakra Dev who occupies this role due to his caste.Indeed, non-Hindus are conspicuously absent from Anamika's world. This is especially significant, because while the use of the *Kamasutra* as a queer source text is reterritorializing, it is also potentially problematic, in that it associates queerness purely with caste Hinduism, and critiques sex between members of different castes. It therefore continues to marginalize subjects such as Rani and Chakra Dev. Indeed, Anamika moves easily from referring to the *Kamasutra*'s advice for giving a lover pleasure to thinking of India as an object and possession (226). It is telling that she continues to refer to her lover as India at such moments. Anamika's inability to understand why she is in fact

willing to risk her prefectureship for Chakra Dev suggests her ongoing misrecognition of him and of their relationship. Even at the novel's end, she remains surprised that he can dress normatively, speak to adults as well as she does, and shares her choice in cologne.

At the close of the novel, Anamika is wrestling with whether or not she should go overseas to pursue her post-secondary education. Rani rightly recognizes that if Anamika chooses to go the United States, she will also be relinquishing some of her caste privileges; becoming equal, however, may actually be an act of loyalty to the nation. As Gayatri Gopinath points out in *Impossible Desires*, "adherence and loyalties to nationalist ideologies 'that' are fully aligned with the interests of transnational capitalism" (10-11). The relative importance of any prospective move is downplayed — not only because Anamika believes it would be temporary (she compares herself to Nehru and Gandhi, whose overseas experiences arguably invigorated, rather than tempered, their nationalism) but also because she believes going to America is mere "child's play," compared to the challenge of negotiating the new world within herself (347).

Perhaps Anamika's journey mirrors the "shift from 1980s deheterosexed *homespaces* to the nationalizing *India* Café to the nationalizing-inter-nationalizing *India International* Center to a 1990s dominant transnationalizing insertion into *McDonalds*" (Bacchetta 960; italics in original). Anamika's early sexual encounters occur in a variety of domestic spaces: Tripta's bedroom, Sheela's bedroom, her own bedroom. But her initial flirtations occur in very public spaces: the school hallway, a public path, a sports field. Indeed, Anamika's romantic and sexual relationship with Rani becomes as developed as it is precisely because Rani, as a servant, is able to sleep in Anamika's room without prompting suspicion. Her encounter with the gay male couple and their son, however, occurs in Delhi's "Diplomatic Enclave" (322).

Whereas lesbians are frequently depicted as lonely and isolated in South Asia, both in fictional accounts and in scholarly studies such as Giti Thadani's *Sakhiyani* (see 113, for example), Anamika's experience in *Babyji* is quite the opposite. Dawesar's refusal to imagine the queer woman as isolated, lonely or permanently traumatized, insists that queer life in India is viable, and rich in possibilities, for both the queer individual and the nation. The novel therefore maps networks of relations that simultaneously challenge and reinforce the regimes of truth intrinsic to Hinduism, class hierarchies, caste divisions and, indeed, the Indian nation-state. These networks form the basis of "hegemony, social, economic and cultural" (Foucault, *Power/ Knowledge* 133) but also provide the means for resistance.

The party at India's home, which takes place in the penultimate chapter, produces a carnivalesque space in which the many desires that animate the text are openly

spoken, and Anamika's multiple entanglements become known. At the same time, Chakra Dev and Anamika become glued together through a new, though potentially treacherous, friendship (344). By its very nature, the carnivalesque, involves the disruption of hierarchies and normative boundaries, and with its fraternization of students and teachers, parents and children, this party is no exception. While this rupture is necessarily confined in time — teachers and students return to school in their usual roles the following day — they are changed by their experiences. The novel therefore ends on an optimistic — if not happy — note.

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