Inhabiting borderzones, becoming woman in women's writing

Posted on July 31, 2025 by Bharti Arora
[vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text css=""]The indeterminate place of the borderzone holds a radical potential to emphasise subaltern (women's) resistances. Chicana thinkers such as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and José David Saldívar (1997) define the borderzone as an epistemic interrogation of the hegemonic project of coloniality/modernity. Anzaldúa proposes,

> 'A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants' (1987, 3).

A study of subaltern (women's) resistances ushers in decolonial revolutions. It comprises broader alliances along a range of intersectional contexts, that is, caste, class, religion, community, and gender, among others. Even as these alliances could be fragile, momentary and/or

contingent, they radicalise the idea of 'becoming women'.

In the context of India, women's writing can unleash women's sexuality from the bonds of custom, patriarchal control and upper-caste norms of purity/pollution. The purity and pollution dyad is deeply entwined with the Indian/South Asian caste system. It marks and stigmatises Dalits as untouchables, and denigrates their labour, movement and consumption practices as dirty and wretched. This dyad further delimits upper caste women's sexualities to the reproductive politics of property ownership and Dalit women's bodies as always already available for sexual labour and consumption.

Women's writing can unleash women's sexuality from the norms of purity/pollution that are further contingent on what Eva Keuls terms phallocracy. Keuls defines the term phallocracy in the context of ancient Athens as a 'cultural system comprising graphic images of the phallus as overt signs of a belief in the inherent superiority of adult, free men acted out in the form of political, social and sexual dominance' (Andrews and Kalpakli 2005, 12). She further argues that it included 'a high level of violence (institutionalised as torture), patriarchal structures of civic government, and imperial ambitions to forcibly dominate outsiders' (ibid).

Phallocratic violence has severe implications for women's rights as individuals and citizens, as it robs them of their consciousness and condemns them to an abject existence. By defining the legitimate and illegitimate boundaries of sex and sexualities, such regimes also circumscribe diverse socio-political and pluriversal contexts of becoming a woman.

It is important to discern how and why women's bodies and sexualities have been inscribed with deviance since the earliest Sanskrit texts. Durba Mitra (2020) illustrates how Indological studies during the British colonisation of India invested in the philology of ancient Sanskrit texts on sex lives, systematically producing the trope of deviant female sexuality. This trope reveals how women, their bodies, and sexualities become sites whereby the colonial state and Bengali social analysts sought to produce and reproduce their notions of colonised societies as 'a timeless archive of unchanging social practices from the ancient to the colonial world' (Mitra, 2020, 27). Such notions were appropriated by elite upper caste Bengali

philologists and scholars like Abinash Chandra Ghose (Rati Sastram 1894), Haran Chandra Chakladar (Kamasutra 1919, The Aryan Occupation of Eastern India 1925) among others, as they re-interpreted indigenous epistemes to determine normative practices of marriage and reproduction for the Indian society under the colonial rule (Mitra 2020, 45). These philological and textual interpretations of the ancient Sanskrit resources played an instrumental role in normalising (and glorifying) the upper caste Hindu traditions on social lives vis-à-vis colonial rule. They further constituted their knowledge about modern social life as deeply entwined with 'proper' feminine comportment. In their analysis, social transgression was the result of women's 'sexual deviance' (Mitra 2020, 27).

Women's writing can, however, offer insights into how families, communities, and the state operate in ways that treat women as reproducers (rather than producers) of the state, as beneficiaries of social welfare, and as second-rate citizens. It can trace these networks across the patriarchal contexts of a colonial, nationalist and post-independence state through which upper caste/middle class women's sexuality became the 'primary index for stages of civilisation' (Mitra 2020, 61).

Women's writing can produces alternative epistemologies rooted in the material contexts of women's everyday lives and resistances. These contexts are akin to borderzones that are marked by fluid, shifting registers of identity on the one hand and a decolonised consciousness on the other.

Krishna Sobti's novel Mitro Marjani [To Hell With You Mitro!] (1967/2018) explores the tensions inherent in a so-called normal heterosexual marriage wherein a woman's body, her desires and sexuality are negated, impelling her to lead a constrained existence. The eponymous protaganist Mitro, however, refuses to settle down in such a conventional marital arrangement. Instead, she revels in her own sensuality, affirming the significance of bodily needs for women.

Mitro's desires slip out of and spill over the categories obsessed with defining sexual mores for women. By so doing, Mitro alters the terms of patriarchal discourse on women's sexual purity/morality within and outside marriage, illustrating that the woman's body is a corporeal body and it is both constructed by and responsive to the multifarious rhythms and

sensations. These are rooted in intimacy, desire, passion and eroticism, among others.

Mitro's resistant subjectivity embodies a creative sense of becoming, which thrives at the borderzone between the socially legitimate and illegitimate perceptions of sexuality.

This creative sense of becoming is deeply entwined with what Ramón Grosfoguel (2012) defines as the philosophy of liberation within the context of critical decolonial thinking. This liberation is contingent on diverse perspectives and/ or insurgent epistemic insights rooted in 'subalternized racial/ ethnic/ sexual spaces and bodies' (Grosfoguel 2012, 3).

Women's writing can privilege insurgent epistemic insights that make a dent in the patriarchal, upper caste and gendered contexts of women. These are often disguised as indigenous/ nationalist cultures, reducing women to simply being reproducers of the family and the nation state.

Women's writing foregrounds the politics of critical decolonial thinking, whereby women reclaim rights over their bodies as individuals and citizens instead of being dependent on the tender mercies of patriarchies.

[/vc_column_text][/vc_column][/vc_row][vc_row][vc_column][vc_separator css=""][vc_column_text css=""]***Photo:*** *Krishna Sobti's Mitro Marjani, front cover* [/vc_column_text][vc_toggle title="Reading group event details" open="true" css=""]Date: 7th May 2025
Title: Inhabiting borderzones, becoming woman: A decolonial reading of Krishna Sobti's select fiction with Bharti Arora
Speaker: Bharti Arora
Chair: Claire French
Minutes by: Nadeen Dakkak[/vc_toggle][vc_toggle title="Selected minutes" css=""]

Bharti:

> How can we arrive at a decolonial reading of this selected fiction by an Indian writer, Krishna Sobti?Sobti is a Hindi writer, and

even though her work has been translated into English, not many would know about Indian writers who write in regional languages. Many people know instead about Indian writers who write in English, like Arundhati Roy and Salman Rushdie. I believe it is important to juxtapose these writings that emerge from regional languages in India with diasporic Indian writing.

We need to understand the role of the colonial state, especially but not only in the case of India, of how the Victorian state contributed to instating new gender norms, especially after the British Crown took over the administration of India from the East India Company. What made this change in gender norms more pronounced is that Victorian norms on women's sexuality joined hands with upper caste conservative Hindu norms on women's sexuality.

The nationalist response to the colonial onslaught worked by creating a public-private divide, the public space dominated by the British and the private space in which women bore the responsibility of upholding the sovereignty of the state. Literary narratives by women can act as decolonial mechanisms of reclaiming control over their bodies and sexualities.

After India's independence in 1947, the institutionalization of the Hindu Code Bill played an important role in determining a lot of rights for women. However, to this day, women's sexuality is treated as property of the man and the traditional patriarchs. For example, while women as daughters and wives did get the right to inherit their father's and/ or husband's property, provisions like the Coparceners right to will away his share into the joint family property and/ or transform the self-acquired property into joint family property severely impacted the right of women.

As Reba Som asserts in "Jawaharlal Nehru and the Hindu Code: A Victory of Symbol over Substance" (1994): "The founding fathers of the Constitution, who, a short while ago had passed the Constitution and accepted without discussion the principles of equality and absence of discrimination between the sexes, now in a total volte face opposed tooth and nail the Hindu Code Bill."

She writes, "Their opposition opened up the Pandora's box of age-old superstitions, complexes, patriarchal feelings and deep-rooted prejudices running along caste, class, religious and regional lines" (171)

The juridical procedures in India lay down that a woman's consent to maintaining physical relations with a man who, she believes, is her husband stands null and void in case it is proven that he has been in a bigamous relationship (without her knowledge). Alternatively, it is judicially not possible for a husband to rape his wife, irrespective of her consent, if she is above the age of 16 years old.

Krishna Sobti's work is important for depicting women exploring their bodies and sexualities in ways that challenge the Indian state's perception of women's role. In this period in which she wrote these two novels, women were not considered equal participants in the national economy, not producers but reproducers, and this is what led them to be seen as not active contributors to the state, but recipients of welfare. Even as women's movements played an instrumental role in bringing about measures addressing a number of issues, such as the dowry, rape, domestic violence, and so on, one of their limitations is that they could not theorize women's sexuality in terms of pleasure, but only in terms of violence and their status as victims.

Sobti's novel *Mitro Marjani* (To Hell with Mitro) was published in 1967 in a decade that saw debates on the Hindu Code Bill. *Mitro Marjani* locates Mitro, the protagonist, at the interstices/borderzone, where she can express herself solely in terms of her individual dignity and bodily desires rather than the dominant gendered habitus. Literature in this era provides an alternative to what was being envisioned by both the State and women's movements. Mitro seeks sexual satisfaction in her marriage and she emphasizes her sexual needs, unlike other characters in the novel. Her wayward desires interrogate the upper caste and/ or class norms that sought to define sexual rights for women.

Sobti's other novel *Surajmukhi Andhere Ke* (Sunflowers of the Dark) was published in 1972 and foregrounds the experience of Ratika as a rape survivor and as a young woman whose body is so sexualized to the extent that she becomes excluded from patriarchal norms of marriage for virgin women. Institutional structures of the state are deeply rooted in a patriarchal mindset where women are considered the property of their husband and, in fact, during the 1960s and 1970s, if a woman lodged a complaint that she has been raped, she was subjected to a humiliating test. The novel delves into Ratika's mind in an attempt to bring out her individuality. Ratika encounters many men, but they are all absorbed in their biased understanding of women as secondary objects of pleasure, and she is accused of being a cold woman when she doesn't respond to them. However, there is a space where she explores her desires and realizes that women are not dependent on men for their sexual fulfilment.

Here, we can extrapolate a lot from the reading by Ratna Kapur. Even if laws have been introduced, there have not been many rights claiming sexual pleasure, or laws enabling women to claim their sexual rights. Society accepts women's engagement in education and career building, but not to the extent that they are allowed to bend heterosexual norms of sexuality. One must be trained to see sexuality as a normal aspect of one's life, to cultivate a healthy attitude towards sexuality rather than embracing normative and conservative views on sexuality in work and university spaces that become sanitized as a result of laws.

Sobti's novel, *Surajmukhi Andhere Ke*, concludes with Ratika having a sexual encounter that allows her to embrace a sexuality that is not mediated through anyone else. Even though this encounter is with a married man, she experiences a moment of affective equality that enables her to transcend her sexuality. Sobti thus deals with women's sexuality in a way that allows them to heal their subjectivities and embrace their sexualities as part of their everyday lives rather than feeling guilty about

them.

Reader:

Throughout your discussion, I was comparing your discussion of Krishna Sobti's writing with the writing of Mridula Garg which you discuss in the journal article you shared with this for this session. One point from that article that really spoke to me was what you say about the anxiety of the patriarchy: "The fact that sexual intimacy outside marriage might lead to the conception of children who could illegitimately inherit the family name and property under coparcenary rights creates a sense of permanent anxiety for patriarchy" (p. 437). This made me think of connections you make between the female body and the nation state. How might fiction such as this build discourses of honesty in relationships? Does that help us think differently of the concept of honesty?

Bharti:

I have also been thinking about this, but we also need to realize that in the context of India and elsewhere, we need to question the idea of the romanticization of the family, and specifically marriage. We inherited these ideas from the colonial state. The family system in India never meant husband, wife and children. It meant extended family. Family was never about the love between husband and wife. If you read these novels published in Bengali in the 19th century, you find men who are concerned about their maternal aunts, for example, and not merely about their wives. This very constitution of the companionate marriage, wherein husband and wife are responsible towards each other, was also part of the nationalist project in which the woman was seen as needing to raise her status to that of the man, and the husband was becoming familiar with the codes of the nation state, the codes of the social mobility and the public

space where you see liberal ideas of sexuality. Hence the idea of the new women. This kind of empowerment was restricted by a consistent folding back into their domesticity, that they have to take care of their families even if they are educated. Ethics, morality and honesty should not be rooted in these gender hierarchies. They should not come from the idea of the sacredness of marriage. They must come from the mutuality of desires. Therefore, and as we see in one of Sobti's novels, an extramarital relationship for the protagonist does not give a sense of escape. Rather, it enables her to move out of these gendered hierarchies.

Reader:

I am thinking in particular about those who are reading these novels and how these novels can influence social life. Can they feed into a discourse led by women in relationships? How can that build a potential for honesty?

Bharti:

Yes, this is where I realize that literature has a long-term role to play because it deals with the everyday, not just exploitation, but something otherwise deemed as normative. Literature focuses on and probes the everyday space; be it unequal, non-egalitarian, or even visionary and/ or transformative; shared amongst men and women, men and men and women and women so that we can become aware of the finer details. Literature can usher in a revolution in the relationships between men and women.

Reader:

I was particularly interested in the piece you shared with us on

sexual harassment and your remarks on how all these patriarchal laws are actually imprisoning women in all sorts of ways. From a UK perspective, we have all these laws preventing sexual harassment , but these have been policing even consensual relationships. As the article says, students at university are adults and this is the first time in their life that they have agency to engage with each other as adults. A lot of these kinds of laws that are being introduced are having this sanitizing effect. People have a worry regarding who they can date and there is an emerging gender segregation, with young women choosing women only halls of residence because of the promise of protection, creating a black and white picture that all relations are dangerous. I was curious about whether, in these novels that you study, which are hetero-centred, there is space for women to speak with one another honestly and privately, to learn from each other's experience? Or is this space embodied by the novel itself in the sexual education it gives readers?

Bharti:

I engaged with some episodes in my book, *Writing Gender, Writing Nation*, from Mahasweta Devi's famous novel *Mother of 1084* that foregrounds Sujata's turmoil and reflections at the loss of her revolutionary son Brati who leaves the comforts of his rich father's house to work closely with the peasantry against feudal and the state oppression during the Naxalite movement (1967). In one such instance, Sujata's visit to Nandini opens up layers of meanings inherent in the gendered history of naxalism in India, particularly in the light of the place of women within the cadres of revolutionary communism. Also, it is during this conversation that Sujata learns, for the first time, about this fascinating side to her son's personality, who loved Nandini and dreamt with her of ushering in an ideal world based on egalitarianism. However. Mahasweta Devi does not interrogate the aggressive masculinism drilled into the naxal cadres, romanticising the armed revolution instead. Even as Nandini participated actively in the revolution, Brati's death, followed by

her custodial torture arrive as a rude shock for Nandini. She feels herself at a loss, with no idea how to continue being a part of the revolution. Even as the narrative highlights the patriarchal and masculinist contexts of the communist movement, this meeting between Sujata and Nandini provides us with a brief glimpse into the world that women imagine and share among each other. We witness in Sujata a desire to move beyond her personal space. Nandini is an individual for Sujata and not just her son's beloved. Though differences in location, ideology, conditioning, and age mark them as distinct from one other, they share something more than just Brati's memories between themselves. Nandini and Sujata share the pain of betrayal at the hands of patriarchal ideology that undergirds the institutions of the nation-state.

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