

Epilogue

Visionary Activism: Religion, Metaphor, and Feminist History

If in our traveling theory, we are alive to the metaphoricity of the peoples of imagined communities—migrant or metropolitan—then we shall find that the space of the modern nation-people is never simply horizontal. Their metaphoric movement requires a kind of “doubleness” in writing, a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without a centered causal logic (Bhabha 1994, 202).

We began this journey of women’s poetic expression in South Asia within defined parameters of language—poets writing in Hindi or Urdu—bounded by political geographies of place and space (in India or Pakistan). Through this comparative study of women’s poetry in Hindi and Urdu in the twentieth century, some possible theoretical suggestions toward a feminist theory of nationalism have emerged.

Too often within interdisciplinary scholarship there is emphasis on the erasure of borders and boundaries. Furthermore, hybridizations of language and ideologies seem to gloss over too dismissively specific, historicized forms of feminist resistance. This study of women’s poetry reveals that, far from being erased, boundaries remain essential to the expression of feminist politics. Subjective experiences are contained within these literary, linguistic, and spatial boundaries even while a host of local/global, village/urban

I borrow the phrase “visionary activism” from Caroline Casey’s radio program, which I listen to regularly on Pacifica Radio. Her show is titled “Visionary Activist,” and in it she uses language borrowed from astrology to awake and provoke compassionate social activism. See Casey (2008).

vocabulary and aesthetics, experiences, and politics are allowed to permeate through its borders. Each poet makes a choice to write in either Hindi or Urdu, further illustrating that although the boundaries of language may be stretched to meet particular political ends, they do not dissolve altogether.

Boundaries speak to linguistic and literary as well as spatial and political demarcations; they are both real and imagined. They have the power to legitimate and condemn people and institutions, liberate and imprison thoughts and ideas, protect and eradicate subjects and citizens. More than just for the sake of political expediency, boundaries exist to protect women (as much as they can confine and restrict them). This is especially true of moments of religious revitalizations, when radical critiques of the state apparatus cannot be voiced without detrimental consequences.

In Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s book *Feminism Without Borders*, she argues that one of the greatest challenges to a global feminist solidarity is the “task of recognizing and undoing the ways in which we colonize and objectify our different histories and cultures, thus colluding with hegemonic processes of domination and rule” (Mohanty 2003, 125). Without a “just and ethical basis for such a dialogue,” she maintains that feminists are bound to reproduce those very structures of domination that feminism seeks to deconstruct (Mohanty 2003, 125).¹ The only way to escape these methodological biases is to “become fluent in each other’s histories,” form “unlikely coalitions,” and be precise about the power (biases, privileges, etc.) of one’s own location so that any ensuing dialogue will be ethical and critically engaged (Mohanty 2003, 125).²

Fluency in each other’s histories can be achieved more equitably by reaffirming those sites of struggles (literary, communal, and philosophical) that

1. See also two other essays in the same book, titled “Under Western Eyes” and “Cartographies of Struggle.”

2. Mohanty quotes both Angela Davis and M. Jacqui Alexander. Mohanty differentiates between two kinds of global sisterhood in her analysis of Bernice Johnson Reagon’s use of coalition “as the basis to talk about the cross-cultural commonality of struggles, identifying survival, rather than shared oppression, as the grounds for coalition” (117) as opposed to Robin Morgan’s global sisterhood paradigm, which stresses “transcendence rather than engagement [as] the model for future social change” (111).

inform the experiences for those women whose history feminists seek to reclaim. Coalitions with religious rhetorical traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam—the three traditions at stake in my project—interpolate new imaginative possibilities for transnational feminism. A sustained engagement with these religious traditions of India and Pakistan should contribute to diminishing the growing antagonism between the urban, cosmopolitan feminist and her parochial, sanctimonious step-sister. If we take up the task that Joan Scott insists we do, that is, to “*not* reproduce . . . and transmit [uncritically] . . . knowledge said to be arrived [at] through experience, but [focus our attention instead at] the analysis of the production of that knowledge itself” (Scott 1992, 37), then it is even more pressing to consider the role of religion in the formation of feminist consciousness in South Asian women’s organizing.

This insistence is registered with greater urgency in the South Asian context than in the Americas, for example, because whereas in the U.S. women-of-color feminist tradition there is a rich “poetics of resistance” (DeShazer 1994 [1997]) that embraces and celebrates women’s spirituality, in the context of South Asia, progressive spirituality is virtually nonexistent. Speaking to Andrea Lunsford in a 1996 interview, Gloria Anzaldúa bridges spirituality and writing and says that artistic expression and shamanism are related. In her words, “while we can’t go back thirty-thousand years to the original forms of shamanism, artists practice a form of shamanism through the imagination—in what you paint, sculpt, draw, or write. . . . Often our stories, ideas, and art enact psychological healing, healing that’s much like that performed by traditional shamans” (Anzaldúa and Keating 2000, 251). Paul Gilroy, in his study of transatlantic black thought, calls this “folk” knowledge a “subculture [which] appears to be the intuitive expression of some racial essence but is in fact an elementary historical acquisition produced from the viscera of an alternative body of cultural and political expression that considers the world critically from the point of view of its emancipatory transformation” (Gilroy 1993, 39). Religion and spirituality are a vital aspect of these struggles. Premodern and “folk” memories should not be seen as stridently antimodern; nor can they be regarded as a call to return to an authentic, untainted past. Rather, as we have seen with the discussion of *Dictée*, embodied experience has the capacity “to give flesh and blood to the

notion of utopia, without betraying it to empirical life” (Adorno, quoted in Gilroy 1993, 212).

As unwieldy as the category of experience as a subject of historical inquiry can be, the repeated turn to subjective experience—which each of the four poets makes—must also be understood as strategies for expressing agency within bounded spaces of language and geography. Through the strategic use of Hindi and Urdu, the poets of this book convey relationships of *emotionality* with other women across class, caste, religion, nationality, and ethnicity. I suggest that perhaps, this strategic use of this language of emotionality facilitates the formation of friendships and political comradeship across divisions of class and caste, religion and ethnicity, communal identities and nationalities.

Poetry is a critical medium through which women in South Asia articulate coalition politics beyond boundaries of state and nation. Poetry’s quality to manipulate metaphoricity and historicity add to its popularity for women. I have alluded to the idea that metaphors in poems function on multiple levels; this is not an Indian peculiarity, but in effect, this is how metaphors work in any language and literature. Metaphors serve as the springboard for reflecting multiple realities, secular and political, at the same time. Largely due to the exigencies of religious revitalizations in post-Partition India and Pakistan, where women’s bodies were remembered and membered in terms of their purity and chastity (or lack thereof), women would no longer have a place to stand (and limbs to stand on!) if they did not voice their grievances within socially sanctioned avenues for protest and redress. In other words, the “doubleness” of meaning that is embedded in any metaphor serves as a protective cover through which women could maintain an impeccable social standing and be critical at the same time. That the beloved of these poems can always signify the divine allows women to be regarded as respectable and faithful (in religious terms) and thus not a direct threat to Islamic or Hindu orthodoxy. Moreover, their ideas can be seen as rooted in the very soil of the subcontinent and thus cannot be condemned simplistically for inflecting Western values and priorities. I do not wish to imply here that these are the only avenues available to women; I have pointed out already in my analysis of their poems that each poet made conscious, deliberate choices about her political commitments during

times of transition and turmoil. Rather, I seek to highlight that in countries polarized by religious revitalization movements, women who choose to remain committed to coalition politics with the widest of indigenous audiences and who avoid being seen (for better or worse) as colluding wholesale with the West have found inspiration in indigenous paradigms that are more salient to the masses they wish to reach. Poetry in South Asia is spread through oral media—speech, song, a poem uttered at the right moment (Rao 1998)—which enables these poets to cut across the widest of audiences in unlikely coalitions of women and men.

With respect to questions of historicity, poetry complicates the linearity of time and narrating the nation. In Benedict Anderson's formulation of the origin of national consciousness, time—specifically the simultaneity of time—was an important intervention in understanding the spread of nationalism. Drawing from Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis*, Anderson cites that “the here and now [are] no longer a mere link in an earthly chain of events, it is *simultaneously* something which has always been, and will be fulfilled in the future.” In other words, this idea of simultaneity is “wholly alien to our world”; it belongs to the realm of the divine, something “eternal, something omnitemporal, something already consummated in the realms of fragmentary earthly event” (Auerbach, quoted and paraphrased in Anderson 1983 [1991], 24). This concept of simultaneity—the whole of the past and future encapsulated in an “instantaneous present”—is quite different from our concept of chronological time today measured, as it is, “by temporal coincidence, and . . . clock and calendar” (Walter Benjamin, cited in Anderson 1983 [1991], 24). Simultaneity in metaphysical discourse is not at all concerned with the idea of “meanwhile,” which Anderson states is “so deep-lying . . . that one could argue that every essential modern conception is based on a conception of meanwhile” (Anderson 1983 [1991], 24n34).

Simultaneity becomes important for us here because metaphors in poetry refuse to be salient without it. I have already elaborated in the foregoing paragraphs on the transport that metaphors provide to divine authority. But what is crucial here is that “simultaneity” in poetry provides a rich historical archive as well. Let me provide a few examples to illustrate my point. History in India was a vibrant and thriving discipline of inquiry prior

to the onset of colonialism, and, more often than not, it “was written in a variety of literary genres” (Talbot 2005). Because of the genres in which Indian historiography appeared, they tended to be overlooked as legitimate historical archive. My argument here is twofold. First, the archive for the poets of this study are not only those sanctioned legitimacy in colonial/postcolonial institutions of the census, map, and museum variety but also at once the preceding centuries of textual, scriptural, and religiosculptural production. Second, their turn to these particular archives in their poems seems to gloss over the entire colonial period, prefiguring a continuity of community pre- and postcolonialism. This is particularly obvious in the case of Mahadevi Varma's poems.

In the chapter on Mahadevi, I tried to illustrate the problems of such a use of simultaneity in comparing her prose and poetry works. For scholars of history, Mahadevi's collapsing of pre- and postcolonial experiences of “Hindu” women seem jarring and quite unsettling; in her poetry, however, this same maneuver worked harmoniously. In this epilogue, I reiterate why this works, not only for Mahadevi but for genres of poetry as they are used in South Asia. This is not to suggest that all poetry should be validated as history. Rather, my argument is that the strategic use of poetry by the poets of this study—the “poem at the right moment” idea—underscores the impression that politicized religion in South Asia has coopted feminist voices and erased them. Far from this, women have used poetry as opposed to prose at just the right time to synthesize ideas about sexuality and emotionality and to more effectively impart a feminist politics. Admittedly, their politics have been veiled, secluded, and guarded in those very metaphors about women's emotionality and sexuality. Yet this limiting boundary illuminates a world that is hopeful and loving for women and more cosmopolitan than the national allegories of the Indo-English novel and short story. Unfortunately, these latter productions remain the favorite archive of most postcolonial theory.

Feminist resistance to nationalisms in India and Pakistan points to a number of theoretical connections between language, writing, gender, and nationalism in South Asia. One could well ask, because all four of these writers are from middle-class or privileged caste backgrounds, how they can

claim to speak to or for women who do not enjoy these positions of power. My answer is simply that they cannot and do not. They can only reflect on, and project in their poetry, a representation of their own subjective positions as women and artists, mothers and wives. What they bring together in their poems, each in her own way, is the discursive relationship between the private, the personal, the domestic, and the state, destabilizing the fixedness of each category and reconfiguring them over time to express their own engagement within them. Experience is thus mediated through context; as the places where they literally stand change, so do their interpretations of their experience. Thus neither experience nor its subsequent reinterpretations remain fixed.

Four short poems from the corpus of these poets should serve to illustrate the theory I have been proposing about experience, language, and feminist consciousness without borders. The poems I translate and cite have in common the theme of love—that most ancient muse of poetry. Love, as I argued in chapter 3 on Gagan Gill, provides at least in part a transport out of the conventional modes of cross-cultural understanding. We grow to love, but we do not love as the grounds to get to know. Love and compassion, the twin ideas for feminist solidarity without borders, are cornerstones of Buddhist teachings; one could go so far as to say they cut across many different religious paradigms. But the specificities of how each poet grounds her love—again, the nuances of vernacularization that mark feminine public authority, capitalism and religious revitalization, and consumerism and cosmopolitanism—change through the decades. Yet what remains common across these decades is the desire to anticipate and address each other as well.

In conclusion, an examination of four poems should exemplify what I have been highlighting about the capacity of women's poetry to reflect both the aesthetics and the politics of embodied experience. Furthermore, embodied experience is limited by sociohistorical considerations because not all social contexts are appropriate for women to express desire and love.

When the screen in the temple is pulled aside, the god does not wake
When showered with rice and flowers, the god is neither moved to
compassion, nor is he pleased

Even when offered a thousand libations from the conch shell he does not
stir
He speaks to us constantly, in our very lives, but he will not speak to us in
the temple.

“Bolehai Nahin” (Varma 2000o, 436)³

Who told you to meet him;
To speak with him?
The bricks are colored red
The wall equally hard
The pieces of glass embedded in the wall,
Will smear with blood, the delicate palms of the hand
Will not allow him to peek into the inner-courtyard at night
Now you will even talk to the breeze.
In the day there are numerous distractions for you in the office
The hidden desires will neither rest at night, nor allow you to rest.
“Khab Men Khab Ka Dar” (Naheed 1987, 18)

The union, which had its moment,
Became a moonbeam
And glittered in the soul
On the other side of the union, however
A desolate silence,
A pale deserted place,
Advances with its mouth open.
For the moonbeam to emerge,
In your piercing eyes,
The flames of longing
Are ablaze
The moth of my heart
Becomes restless
And throbs away

3. I thank Tyler Williams for discussing this poem with me in great detail.

Then, what is this power
 That pulls me in
 And places me far from you.
 The matchmaker of life!
 Why does she adorn me so
 In the darkness of the body
 Burn me like fire.
 “Vasl Ik Kiran Ban Kar” (Riaz 1974, 65–67)

In waiting for her friend
 She roamed the entire city
 She saw the city’s most beautiful flower
 She reflected on the city’s most serene road
 She carefully chose a book
 To give to him
 No object
 To flatter him
 Seemed enough.
 “Khushamdid” (Gill 2001 [1989], 91)

Juxtaposing these four poems illustrates how the voices of Mahadevi Varma, Kishwar Naheed, Fahmida Riaz, and Gagan Gill differ from each other in their strategic use of embodied experience. Yet there are connections between the poets as well: the facility to draw from sanctioned literary tropes to express heightened desire. These points of connection between voice, language, politics, and sexuality are what I explore in this epilogue, while acknowledging that over time, the terms of the debate change.

In Mahadevi’s poem, the other is god, but it is not a devotional poem about god. She notes that while her teacher (*pandit-ji*) thought this poem was about the love between Radha and her divine consort, Krishna, Mahadevi meant to address an altogether different theme, “Upon reading this verse, the *pandit-ji* explained to me the dialogues of Radha and Krishna. But at the time when I was writing this poem, I was writing about something entirely different. This is why I suffered the displeasures of both my mother and the

pandit-ji, because in reality, this poem is about my opposition to (or anger with) god” (Varma 2000o, 436).⁴

“Bolehai Nahin” (“He Will Not Speak”), like many of her pre-Chhayavad poems, is written entirely in Braj Bhasha. It challenges the utility of worshiping an idol in the temple and asks what it means to perform the rites of worship in the physical space of the temple, where the power relationship between the devotee and god is unequal. Moreover, as Mahadevi noted in one of her childhood reminiscences about performing worship with her mother, the idol could not exhibit agency, nor was it capable of reciprocity. “My feelings of compassion were aroused, in the first place, with respect to Thakur-ji. [My mother] would bathe me in the early morning. Thakur-ji would also bathe in cold water. Whatever sufferings I endured, it seemed as if Thakur-ji was also enduring them. So I wrote my first poem that mother’s Thakur-ji is very simple/silly. He gets bathed in cold water; he gets smeared with cold sandalwood; his food is given to us; but even then he would never speak” (Varma 2000l, 409). In Mahadevi’s poem, however, the idol is no longer seen as a simpleton; he comes to embody her inaccessibility to him in the space of worship (temple). In the last line of the poem, Mahadevi highlights this point: it is not as if he never speaks but does so only in the “private” space of the body, not in the “public” space of the temple. She writes: “He speaks to us constantly, in our very breaths / but he will not speak to us in the temple.” Public recognition of mutuality is impossible for women of her time, and this impossibility compels her to become angry.

Mahadevi’s contextualization of the poem reveals a crucial departure from the aesthetics of love in Braj Bhasha. Radha’s love of Krishna was set in the framework of devotion to God. It is not so much that Mahadevi didactically challenges Radha’s love (as some of the Dvivedi poets, like Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, did) but that she interrogates the performativity of love within prescribed spaces. Traditional spaces and avenues to enact one’s love

4. For a reflective account about god worship during her childhood years, see Varma (2000l, 409–10).

of god, such as the temple, or vis-à-vis an idol, Mahadevi suggests, project women's desires in only disembodied frames.

In Kishwar's poem, we have moved away from a devotional framing of love and are cast into the arena of love in a wage-earning, global economy. During the day, when she is engaged at work in the office, she can distract her mind from her beloved. But at night, he assaults her in her very body, preventing her from sleeping. The continuities with the aesthetics of classical love (exemplified by the *ghazal*) continue to operate in Kishwar's poem as night marks the arrival of one's lover; the heart yearns for one's lover at night; the dark night is reminiscent of the beloved hair; the stars sparkle like his eyes, and so on. But the voice of the woman who speaks in this *nazm* reflects a mutuality and reciprocity of love heard infrequently (if at all) in the *ghazal*.

The poet begins by chiding herself for making the move to meet and speak with her beloved. "Who told you to meet with him // and talk with him?" she asks in the opening lines, telling us that she acted as an agent in her own right. As she sleeps in the inner courtyard (*angan*: a place where women traditionally slept) at night, surrounded on all sides by the red brick walls of the house, she reflects on her loneliness in her beloved's absence. As her longing for him becomes more intense, her heart throbs with memory shards; this is represented through the metaphor of the "blood-smeared hands" that work to create the walls of the *angan*. The pieces of glass that are crushed and blended into the cement to make it strong and bind together come to represent the memories embedded in her heart.

These pieces of glass can also be windows into the inner courtyard; only this time, they prevent the lover from glancing inside. Likewise, the memory shards that pierce the poet's heart at night forbid him from getting close to her. Unable to sleep and unable to chase away the memories, the poet has no recourse but to talk to the breeze that blows through the courtyard.

Veiled as she is in the protective walls of the inner courtyard, she has no one to speak to about her pain and suffering. In the public domain of the corporate office and work, on the other hand, she finds some release from her isolation, some respite from her torture. Thus, the private spaces of home and the body are a constrictive boundary to the world outside. Although they can sometimes be places of retreat and escape, they also serve as reminders

of women's inaccessibility to the public. As we saw with Mahadevi's poem, women's inability to achieve personal sovereignty in the public serves as a reminder of the structural inequalities of her society.

Whereas in Kishwar's poem desire cannot cross the boundary of the inner sanctum of the home, Fahmida's poem foregrounds the bodily sensations and visceral experiences of a woman in love. In the short excerpt of "Vas! Ik Kiran Ban Kar" ("The Union Became a Moonbeam"), the continuities with the *ghazal* tradition are apparent. The *nazm* begins by describing the meeting of two lovers in conventional ways—it was like the subtle moonbeam; after it ended and morning arrived, desolation and isolation lay waiting ahead; it lasted only for a split-second in time, and so forth. Soon thereafter, her language bursts into vividly erotic descriptions of physical contact between the lovers.

While the tropes of the moth and the flame abound throughout the poem, the poetic voice leaves behind any evidence of formality and distance between the two lovers and explodes into a sensual array of love's vicissitudes. The intensity of her love for her beloved propels her closer toward him and away from him at the same time. The walls dividing their bodies melt away, and her desires burn deep inside. Fahmida's voice, as refracted through tropes of desert, fire, moonlight, and so on, is both active and unashamedly direct; her choice of transitive verbs earthy, "rustically" Hindi, and onomatopoeic.

By the time we get to Gagan, we have moved away from the conventions of language to which Mahadevi felt inextricably bound if she wished to explore themes of feminine desire and longing. In fact, Gagan's vocabulary is overtly Perso-Arabicized and, as such, is a different kind of political statement. Her poem maps the contours of the city and her movements through it. As she passes through the city's gardens, byways and pathways, bookstores and all, she found something of herself to share with her beloved. But she remained unsure of her "self" and where she stood in relationship with him.

Gagan's poem further reflects her cosmopolitan sensibility; she lives in the city, she moves freely through it, she is a consumer in it. The incorporation of Urdu vocabulary into her Hindi poem must therefore be seen as part of her linguistic mapping of Delhi's different spaces, of which she is also an integral part.

In the politically charged social climate of the South Asian subcontinent in the twenty-first century, given its historical record of religiopolitical violence, language has come to occupy a crucial space in defining and denying communal histories. That these poets seek both to engage in this process and to resist it through their play with language and modes of expression (poetry or prose) is telling of how some women have sought to transcend rigid divisions of nation and community, casting their allegiances with communities across these boundaries. This is not to suggest that they denounce their citizenship and give up their passports—though Fahmida raises this possibility in her prose travelogue *Zinda Bahar Lane* (the name of a street), contemplating for a moment what it would be like to become a Bangladeshi citizen and teach her children Bengali (Riaz 2000, 157).⁵ Rather, they decide to support feminist allegiances in confronting the state, and question its validity at other times, choosing instead other kinds of sociopolitical commitments.

In addition to their play with language to express cross-cultural experiences, the four poets of this book have also located themselves in the liminal spaces of society—both public and private. Their poems reveal incontestably that despite the liminality of their lived, experiential realities, poetry provides a protected space from which they can venture out and write themselves in multiple ways.

As I close this book, I return to the question of language, specifically Hindi and Urdu, without foreclosing the possibilities it engenders. If, as Suditpa Kaviraj has suggested, narratives are both relationally constituted and reflect the ethos of a particular self tied to particular communities—in that they tell the story of some “self” to “other selves” (Kaviraj 1993, 13, 16)—and if the primary task of consolidating communal identity is to tell the story of its history, we have to read the poetry of Mahadevi Varma, Fahmida Riaz, Kishwar Naheed, and Gagan Gill as voicing the multiple histories of selves and communities of which they are an integral part.

Mahadevi once described Hindi as having developed with the land and people’s heart (*lokhriday*), not as belonging to one particular religion or community but to the thousands of generations of people for whom it

symbolized a means of communication (Varma 2000f, 72–73). Her use of Braj Bhasha and Avadhi in her Hindi poetry further buttresses the idea that although she actively engaged the movement to make Khari Boli Hindi a literary standard, she found ways to stretch its boundaries from within, resisting its hegemonic classist and casteist tendencies. Each poet of this study, in her own way, has reconstituted the continuities of community and identity that hitherto seemed irrevocably lost.

5. *Zinda bahar* is “eternal spring.”

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