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Chapter 6

Relocating Home and Diasporizing the South Asian Queer

Shuhita Bhattacharjee

This essay examines the complex representation of queerness as an imagined diasporic state in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Blooming Season for Cacti" ([2000] 2001) and Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008). I trace a longer trajectory with works like Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt" ([1941] 2009; a translation of her Urdu original titled "Lihaaf") and productions like Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) that came before it, and problematize through my argument the very idea of the queer diaspora itself by showing how Patil's work which is produced not technically by a diasporic author at all should still form part of this continuum. My aim is to depart from the usual works on 'queer diaspora' that focus on 'queering the diaspora' and that do so by showing how the queer state and the diasporic state come together in their common transgressive potential. Instead, I attempt to *diasporize the queer* (to borrow from Avtar Brah's reference in *Cartographies of Diaspora* to "diasporising processes" and the "condition of diasporisation"), drawing on literary-cultural works by women of Indian origin, a mix that includes both strictly diasporic compositions and others that only evoke the diaspora (Brah 1996, 204, 240). These are all works that have been discussed explicitly in the context of the South Asian diaspora, with the final and crucial exception of Amruta Patil's *Kari* that brings my argument to culmination, showing that queer sexuality as an experiential space evokes the diaspora *as a state of mind*. I argue, therefore, the crucial need to now diasporize the queer, demonstrating the way it is constructed as a state of desire that evokes and resides in the *imagined* diasporic space. This does not happen by simplistically equating the supposed liberatory potential of the queer and of the

diasporic state that are understood to unsettle the sexual and national hegemonies respectively. Instead, I show how the diasporization of the queer state that takes place in these texts throws into relief the complex departures that a South Asian (Indian) queer experience makes from the dominant and homogenising (west-dominated) international rhetoric of gay rights, and the way it challenges the teleological axis that is generally constructed between a purportedly queer-unfriendly regressive Third World and a progressive gay-proud West.

The Works at a Glance

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Blooming Season for Cacti" tells the tale of Mira who migrates to California (with a brief detour through Texas) after her only surviving parent, her mother, goes missing (and is suspected dead) in violent Hindu-Muslim Bombay riots. Mira is saved because her mother hides her in their household water tank with a supply of food before disappearing herself. In California, Mira discovers her queer desire for a co-worker, Priya, and ultimately her deep reciprocal love for Radhika (her employer, Malik's, second wife) even while she tries to submerge herself within the heteronormative courtship and domesticity offered by Ajit. Radhika, spurned by Mira, attempts to commit suicide from which she is saved, and Mira leaves the household quietly out of her love for Radhika, sadly contemplating an alternative world where her relationship with Radhika might have seen a better fate.

In *Kari*, Amruta Patil tells the story of Kari who begins her narrative by depicting the severance she suffers from her partner, Ruth, who leaves (after attempted suicide) for a faraway location. The novel traces Kari's life in the smog-clouded and stench-ridden Mumbai, her

struggles to fit into Crystal Palace (her home that has two other heterosexual couples, Billo and Zap, and Delna and Orgo), her attempts to successfully sell a stereotypical(-ly heteronormative) ad campaign (the “Fairytale Hair” commercial), her troubled relationship with Angel (who is terminally ill with cancer), and finally her success in evading suicide despite her wretched loneliness in the absence of Ruth.

The two other works I briefly reference are Ismat Chughtai’s “The Quilt” and Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*. Chughtai’s work, a very early and controversial text about queer desire, portrays a lesbian relationship between Begum Jaan (whose husband, the Nawab, suggestively also engages in queer encounters with young boys) and Rabbu (Begum Jaan’s servant), witnessed confusedly by the very young narrator, Amiran, who herself is sexually violated by Begum Jaan. And *Fire* is a tale of a middle-class household where sisters-in-law, Radha and Sita, ignored by their husbands, develop a deeply loving lesbian relationship in an atmosphere where various kinds of forbidden and suspect relationships jostle with each other—relationships that include the ascetic submission of one husband to his religious guru, the extramarital relationship of the other husband with a Chinese woman, and the masturbatory releases of the male domestic help to pornographic videos in full view of Biji (the mother-in-law of Radha and Sita).

Of the creators whose works I discuss, Deepa Mehta, an Indian-Canadian filmmaker, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian-American author, are both unarguably women creators of Indian origin who are located in the North American diaspora. Ismat Chughtai, because of her exposure to transnational circles and her bifurcated existence between Karachi and Bombay, has also been interestingly grounded in the diasporic cultural landscape by Gayatri Gopinath in *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005). And I follow Gopinath’s lead, extending the logic to argue more debatably that Amruta Patil’s *Kari*, composed

while Patil was in India (as opposed to Patil's *Parva* duology, consisting of *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* and *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers*, that was produced while she was in USA and France), should also form a crucial part of this trajectory because of the way it diasporizes the state of queer desire, and much like the other works complicates an understanding of the South Asian queer reality by departing from a predominantly western metropolitan narrative of the queer.

Setting the Stage: The Diaspora and the Queer

In *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities*, Kim Knott and Seán McLoughlin (2010), discussing the gendered (and therefore also queer) studies of the diaspora, note that “[p]ost-structuralist approaches to gender, particularly those foregrounding discursive and representative dimensions, have been increasingly influential within the study of diasporas” (121). Meg Wesling (2008) notes that in scholarly works that deal with literary-cultural productions and sociological features of the queer diaspora or of queer globalization, “the queer subject and the diasporic subject [are often conjoined] as theoretical twins” (31). Knott and McLoughlin explain:

Queerness is perceived as a mobile resistance to the boundaries and limits imposed on gender, which is seen as similar to the migrant's movement through national and cultural borders. In other words, queerness is constructed to disrupt gender normativity as globalization and transnational diaspora activities and practices disrupt national sovereignty. (121)

That is to say, “such work offers the diasporic queer as the exemplary subject of globalization, in order to posit an analogy between queerness as that which subverts gender normativity, and diaspora as that which troubles geographic and national stability.” (Wesling, 31). Wesling concludes that the “diasporic queer subject thus becomes a doubly mobile or transgressive body, who challenges not simply the repertoire of localized categories of desire but the stability of national identity itself” (33). Not only this, Gopinath observes the ‘natural’ consonance of the ‘queer’ and the ‘diaspora’ because of how both are perceived and constructed as inauthentic/foreign within nationalist discourse. This, as Gopinath observes, is evident from the allegations levelled by the Indian (Hindu nationalist) political spectrum against Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* where the film was condemned as foreign (un-Indian) in its sensibility because of its depiction of lesbianism—critiques that bring into “sharp relief the conflation of both ‘queer’ and ‘diaspora’ as inauthentic and alien within nationalist discourse” (132).

But this automatic assumption of the liberatory potential of the queer and of the diasporic states, and the unquestioning conjoining of the (transgressive) mobility that they both supposedly offer, is a scholarly trend critiqued by many writers including Wesling and Gopinath. Knott and McLoughlin insightfully observe that a crucial issue that has interested “feminist scholars of different disciplinary backgrounds” is the question of “whether diasporas provide enabling contexts in which previous gender norms can be challenged or whether they reproduce and possibly even harden existing gender ideologies and relations.” They point out in conclusion that interestingly “existing literature provides evidence for both scenarios,” defeating any attempt to naively link the supposed subversive potential of the queer and of the diasporic states (119). In *The Globalization of Sexuality*, Jon Binnie (2005) similarly dismantles such simplistic optimism by referring to other authors like Aihwa Ong and Jarrod Hayes and declaring that “[c]onceptually

the transnational” or the diasporic (which incidentally he opposes to the ‘global,’ a distinction not of great significance for my current project) in fact “signifies the *resilience* of the nation-state” (34, emphasis mine).

Thus, instead of this usual scholarly tendency of queering the diaspora, my aim will be to diasporize the queer—i.e. to understand the way in which the diaspora is in fact also and fundamentally *a state of the mind*, and one that becomes a psychological mode for the very experience of queer desire. Additionally, while drawing on the diasporic (or transnational / global / cosmopolitan) space *imaginatively*, these texts also work to reshape the coordinates of what an Indian gay identity and experience might be understood to reside in based on the uniquely South-Asian nature of their reality, as distinct from the western frameworks available for such theorisation.

It is useful to refer to certain theoretical touchstones that help understand the idea of diaspora as a psychological and not necessarily a physical state. But before inspecting these landmarks, it is important to also briefly note the use of terms like global, transnational, and cosmopolitan that are consistently employed in the field to theorize the idea of the universal ‘global gay’ subject or the gay diasporic subject—one who is united by transnational ties across the major metropolitan centres of the world and who is able to embody the fight for queer identity and gay rights in accordance with the international discourse on these subjects (especially in an age of virtual connectivity when our discourses of politics, culture, and human rights are often sculpted on this border-free digital space). Without delving into the nuanced differences of these terms, I will be using these terms (global /transnational/ cosmopolitan/ diasporic) interchangeably to suggest the body of literature that has been produced surrounding the idea of geographical displacement accompanied by transnational networks of culture

commonality and metropolitan visibility. This will help connect the discussions of queer diaspora to the larger swathe of scholarly work of which it forms a part. Most importantly, as I have already mentioned, my aim is to see this form of existence as essentially a psychological one, i.e., as a state of consciousness or imagination, that draws the various individuals across the international spectrum together regardless of their location, and that entitles each to a diasporic state of being even when they have not geographically travelled.

I return now to the discussion of crucial ideational interventions that help to understand the diasporic (global / cosmopolitan / transnational) state as a fundamentally imagined one. Avtar Brah proposes the concept of “diaspora space” that “is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes” (178). This “addresses the global condition of culture, economics and politics as a site of ‘migrancy’ and ‘travel’ which seriously problematizes the subject position of the ‘native’” and ultimately proposes “diaspora space as a conceptual category [that] is ‘inhabited’ not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous” (178). That is, “the concept of diaspora space (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put.’ . . . The diaspora space is the site where *the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native.*” (178, 205) In *Contemporary Diasporic South Asian Women's Fiction: Gender, Narration and Globalisation*, Ruvani Ranasinha (2016) notes Vijay Mishra’s idea of “diasporic imaginary” that he theorizes in *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (Mishra 2007, 14). Mishra uses this term to refer “to any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously or unconsciously, as a group in displacement” (Mishra 14). Mishra observes that “diasporas are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined

displacement, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by spectres, by ghosts from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements” (Mishra 1). This definition once again gestures at the imagined aspect of the diasporic state if not directly positing the exclusively imagined nature of a kind of diasporic experience such as that theorised by Avtar Brah. In his book, Jon Binnie draws upon Roland Robertson’s understanding of globalization that provides an “alternative to political-economic definitions of globalization” and that “characterizes globalization as ‘the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole’” (Robertson, *Globalization*, 1992, 8; quoted in Binnie, 33). Binnie explains that that definition is “preferable as it points towards ‘consciousness’, and is thus more immediately relevant for researchers of sexuality,” and in the process foregrounds the understanding of a diasporic / transnational / global / cosmopolitan state as a psychological one (33). Binnie also observes the phenomenon of “imagined cosmopolitanism” that undergirds the international consumption of ‘gay cultural events.’ Binnie notes the “‘allure’ of the glamour” of global gay events “as a form of cosmopolitan consumption” in key cosmopolitan locations (famous global gay-friendly cities such as London, Paris, and others) and shows how it is “experienced vicariously from afar by reading through the international gay media, even though most people will never travel or get to experience such events in the raw (Schein, 1999; Boellstorf, 1999).” They are therefore, as Binnie observes, a form of what Louisa Schein (following Benedict Anderson) has termed an “imagined cosmopolitanism” that “rests in the longing to be part of this global consumer culture” (128). Binnie notes that “[t]hey are highly significant in helping to construct, frame and reproduce a global gay imaginary.” Binnie explains how Schein, working on China, observes “that global media play a significant role in making products desirable to those who are not able to buy these goods” (128). Schein (1999) remarks

that “what makes this cosmopolitanism imagined is the consumption of the marketed images rather than the actual buying of the brands these images are promoting” (360). Thus, while cosmopolitanism is about “worldliness and knowledge (i.e. knowing about which brands are available),” according to Schein, “imagined cosmopolitanism” means that “even if you do not purchase these brands you consume them through the adverts, derive the magic from them.”

(360) It is in this sense of imagined cosmopolitanism / globalization / transnationalism that my understanding of the diasporic consciousness resides where one inhabits this state even when one is not physically located in the ‘foreign’ land but is still living in one’s ‘homeland.’ I argue that this global or diasporic consciousness is intrinsic to the very texture of queer experience narrated by the women authors under study.

That the modern queer experience is intrinsically global / transnational / diasporic is something that is demonstrated by several other scholars also who operate less from a theoretical and more from an anthropological and cultural studies perspective. In the editorial essay to the anthology titled *Queer Globalizations*, Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin Manalansan (2002) begin by noting: “Queer is now global. Whether in advertising, film, performance art, the Internet, or the political discourses of human rights in emerging democracies, images of queer sexualities and cultures now circulate around the globe.” (1) Moreover, queer sexuality has emerged on the global marketplace not just by marketing (often imaginatively for those who cannot afford it) commodities to the global gay population but by often converting queer sexuality itself to an experiential (and probably even aspirational) commodity. Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin Manalansan observe that “[r]epresentations of queer lives and desires in such mainstream Hollywood films” (as *Philadelphia*, *To Wong Foo*, and *Go Fish*) and in the “more arty international productions” (the British *The Crying Game*, the Cuban *Strawberry and*

Chocolate, and the *Indian Fire*) sell excellently as “global commodities to ‘general audiences.’” And “gay and lesbian lifestyle products, from pink triangles to rainbow flags to the Carlos and Billy dolls and gay.com cruises” are “more frequently bought as identity markers by queers around the globe.” (1) Meg Wesling sums up Cruz-Malave and Manalansan’s argument by pointing to the two developments they trace. They note firstly “the increased visibility of queer sexualities through the global circulation of images of, and commodities for, queers.” Then they go on to note that “the transnational coordination of queer politics” is “a form of global coalition-building made possible through queer visibility in the market place” (Wesling 32). Finally they argue, says Wesling:

[I]t is the commodification of gay and lesbian identity that enables the international recognition of, and mobilization around, struggles for sexual and social justice, making not only the visual codes of queer identity, but also the struggles for queer rights, recognizable in a transnational framework. (32)

It is this transnational / global space that these literary-cultural works inhabit, often in the sense of the imagined ‘diaspora space’ that I discussed above. Gopinath foregrounds, for instance, this precise sense of a transnational space that makes a queer sexual experience available to the characters in Chughtai’s “The Quilt” and Mehta’s *Fire*. While *Fire* is an international collaborative production that circulated transnationally with screenings across the globe and is therefore clearly “a mobile, diasporic text,” Gopinath explains how Chughtai, who did not technically occupy a geographical diasporic space, still creatively inhabits the diasporic state in “The Quilt” and renders a queer experience stemming from it. Gopinath explains that

Chughtai's text though "geographically and culturally rooted," still reflects "transnational influences" and inhabits Avtar Brah's 'diaspora space' (143–4). In fact, Gopinath explains that:

Chughtai's suspension between . . . [her] two points of belonging, between here and there, Karachi and Bombay, maps out an alternative geography of affect that cannot abide by the logic of the bounded, discrete nation-state and that lays bare the arbitrariness of national borders. (144)

And finally, Gopinath drives the point home by concluding that these "multiple movements compel us to rethink the conventional distinction between 'diaspora' and 'nation': the nation is marked by diasporic movement just as the diaspora becomes a part of the nation." (144)

Diasporising the Queer in Divakaruni and Patil

In "The Blooming Season for Cacti," Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni begins by staging the transition of Mira to the archetypal diaspora that is California, one that in the world of the text can only be accessed by a desert that has "[b]rown land, brown sky, hills like brown breasts" (167). These references ("[b]rown land, brown sky") remind us not only of Mira's brown body and implicitly her brown South-Asian reality that defines her hybrid existence in this white location, but more specifically prefigures her queer desire ("hills like brown breasts") and the world of the queer diaspora that becomes more evident as we read on (167). The subversion embodied in the opening passages by this South Asian queer diaspora already in the making is made explicit when Mira notes how the "sand rippled into a thousand lines of cursive" forming "a dangerous

alphabet” (168). The swirly cursive reminds one of Amruta Patil’s illustrations in *Kari* where every initiation into the world of queer desire, every hint of gay sexuality, registers pictorially through the shift from clearly demarcated straight lines to a mass of swirly ones. This is most evident in the part where Kari looks back upon her own love story with Ruth. Kari sets this up as a conventional cinematic narrative, showing how they passed by each other for the first time at a railway station. Their first meeting is set against a noticeboard in the backdrop that displays stills from the heteronormative mainstream cult classic, the movie *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, institutionalizing the normative love story in the world of the novel, and therefore exposing by contrast the transgressive departure signalled by the romance of Kari and Ruth (68). Following this, the next page features three parallel panels from top to bottom showing the progress of the love story with Kari and Ruth standing at the left and right extremities of each panel and lines in the background connecting them. It is here that we see how the lines between the two characters change noticeably, going from straight (where they are face to face) to randomly curvy (where their eyes meet) and finally to pronouncedly and artistically swirly (where they are clearly naked and Kari is holding Ruth by the thighs). The narrative underneath says: “Whatever love laws have to be broken, the first few seconds suffice” (69). The transgressive queer love contorts the straightness of the lines in Patil’s work and morphs them into something closer to the dangerous “cursive” of the diasporic Californian desert in Divakaruni. This diasporic exodus, though physical and literal in Divakaruni’s text (where Mira really travels to Sacramento through the Californian desert), is presented in this text, I would argue, as a metaphor for what is essentially also a daring queer sexual adventure for the narrator. The most candid register for this is the trope of the desert’s blooming cacti—centred by the very title of the story—that functions as a dual image for both the diasporic landscape and queer desire in the text. Thus, Mira and Radhika

bond over the reading of *The Great Deserts of the American West* that describes the unexpected and ephemeral beauty of the desert cacti which startlingly sprout soft blossoms from within their unlikely thorny hard exteriors—cacti that belong to both the symbolic and literal diasporic space of the desert—and the blooming of which is poignantly enshrined by Radhika as the perfect metaphor for Mira in her secret love poem. This book that Mira and Radhika affectionately peruse for hours depicts firstly “vibrant coronets of hedgehog cactus, candy cactus and prickly pear that push out through the plants’ spiny armament,” an image that symbolizes the unexpectedness of the beauty of queer love, and references secondly the cacti’s “brief flowering,” an allusion that suggests the mortality of such love in the face of social opposition. Mira further suggests the dangerousness of queer desire when Radhika points to the illustration of the cactus in the book and Mira quietly admits to herself that she had “always imagined their thorns to be stinging, poisonous” (187). Despite this ominous warning about the poisonous thorns of the cacti, she is led to admit to how the “evening light” in the picture captures a certain “fineness so that they shine, exalted, like the hair of infants” (187). The suggestion of innocence (through the reference to ‘infants’) underlying the purportedly corruptive nature of queer desire is significant, as is the quiet gurgling sexuality of Radhika’s love poem, already marginalized on a discarded and crumpled piece of paper (that Mira accidentally unearths later), which tides over societal allegations and personal fears in depth and in impact. Radhika writes for Mira:

“In the desert of my heart,
You, cactus flower,
Blooming without thorn.” (205)

Layered by the suggestions of diasporic existence and queer sexual desire, the blooming cactus of the desert emerges as a powerful and frightening metaphor that both invites and discourages. Queer sexuality seems to find manifestation through the rhetoric of the diaspora, a state not merely physical at all despite Mira's actual journey, but in fact a state of the mind that blends powerfully with queer experience itself in texture and in complexity. Queer sexuality in the text resonates then with the general depiction of the diasporic state—embodied by the larger symbol of the (Californian) desert itself—the desert as brimming with both potential and peril. The narrator seems to welcome this landscape with its potential promises: “I wanted to climb to the top of the highest dune. I wanted to be transformed to the bone.” (168) This is despite the clear threat of predatoriness that accompanies the diasporic setting represented by this desert: “Above, vultures waited to swoop down on the helpless skitter of smaller creatures.”(168) Gradually, her fears begin to disappear: “Some of the scared hardness at my core was melting in the desert's heat. For the first time since I got to America.” All the potential underlying this shift to diasporic existence begins to take flight: “I was a burning wind. I was a lit fuse. And I was coming to California.” (168) She even feels “desert-dangerous”—implicitly about both her upcoming diasporic adventures and her sexual ones—but only for a while before she begins to feel “tired and, again, afraid” once she smells the familiar Indian smells from behind the kitchen doors of Malik-ji's restaurant—“the old, known smells and the boundaries they once promised” (172). All of these comments apparently on the geographical displacements (and on the crossing of topographical “boundaries”) that accompany a diasporic shift now acquire, on a closer reading, the character of a metaphor where the fears and fascinations relating to a geographical diaspora begin to refer to a diasporic state of mind and through it to a queer sexual life that shares many of the same anxieties and complexities. In effect, queer sexuality becomes

metaphorically and rhetorically a diasporic state, helping us diasporise the queer. As the narrator asserts towards the very end, braiding together these two strands most overtly: “Who is to say? If a woman finds joy in the spare, pared flesh of the desert, if she finds joy in another woman’s sand-brown body, who is to say?” (208)

Most overtly, the picture of the woman in the desert that Radhika and Mira see together in the book ultimately slides into this ideational chalkboard when the narrator tries to imagine the (fictional) journey of this “woman in the photo” (probably by “a bus” when “she moved to the hills,” says Mira). (208) The woman seems to have arrived at the desert—one that is by now the symbol of both diasporic destination and queer desire. And Mira wonders if someone had warned the woman “saying what she was doing, it just wasn’t right, wasn’t natural”—reprovals that draw together what Mira heard from her sister-in-law and what stereotypically one hears from societal founts of conventional wisdom that condemn a woman’s independent (diasporic) travel and (queer) sexual adventures (208). Eventually the woman’s “small, secret smile” (208) and the shadow across her face reveal themselves and with it the secret of her queer desire when Mira ends her tale by declaring confidently (“I *decide* I know whom she is smiling at”) the paradigm-shifting nature of the woman’s queer love: “It is her lover, the woman whose shadow has entered the photograph, and in doing so *shifted the balance* of light” (209, emphasis mine). And with this Mira’s own queer desire blends in when she describes her love for Radhika borrowing the dually charged imagery of desert-travel and blooming-cacti: “On the long bus ride south, and later, in sand and rock, among the fierce momentary blooming of cacti. I’ll lean my head into her [Radhika’s] shoulder. I’ll run my fingers over her scar . . .” (209) At one level, ‘shifting the balance,’ both of geographical and sexual hierarchies, the South-Asian queer female body inscribes itself on the Californian desert, but more crucially for this essay, in the depiction

of Mira and Radhika's desire, queer sexuality itself is rendered akin to an imagined diasporic state of mind, contributing to the diaporization of the queer experience.

A similar diasporization of the queer experience takes place in Amruta Patil's *Kari* in a manner even more pronounced because in this case the author is not clearly located in the diaspora and neither is the text. What I suggest is that the manner in which the queer experience is constructed in the text gestures towards, and not in an uncomplicated way at all, the imagined diasporic state. On the one hand, the diasporic journey is seen as leading away from an acknowledgment of queer desire—Ruth flies to a distant land, away from the reality of a gay relationship with Kari. But on the other hand, the diasporic state is one that continues to characterise, fuel and flavour the various dimensions of gay love because Kari—located in Mumbai itself—ponders, develops, and pursues her queer desire entirely with reference to Ruth and her faraway existence.

As Ruth separates from Kari after her attempt at suicide, Kari imagines Ruth leaving in an airplane: “[S]he got into a plane and left. Her last memory of the city must be an aerial one. Dark and ablaze with fistfuls of light. The airport was a ford, and she crossed over.” In the illustration, while the co-passengers are shown to be sleeping, Ruth is portrayed as the only one watching with open eyes and with a lingering look as the airplane recedes from Kari's skyline—a moment of acknowledgment of queer desire and diasporic departure that others prefer to not acknowledge (6–7). The airport as a ford providing paradoxically both escape and empowerment to Ruth, as well as the aerial view of a city submerged in darkness (suggesting both loneliness and ignorance) and emphasized through a two-page extended depiction, renders this an iconic moment in the diasporization of queer love. On the one hand, this is a defeat of queer desire when Kari continues to lament Ruth's departure (wondering, for example, at the sight of a

woman on the street, “Would she fall in forever love with me and never leave?”) (54). But simultaneously, the move away from Mumbai to an implicitly foreign (international) location is also what provides the occasion for the assertion of queer love / desire repeatedly throughout the text and suggestively also facilitates Ruth’s pursuit of a gay relationship more freely outside of India. This distancing of/from queer desire is seen both as alienating and empowering, saddening and assertive—much like the simultaneous misery and triumph of modern-day diasporic displacement. But this relationship of queer and diasporic experientiality in the text is far more complex.

On the one hand, the text begins with the flight of diasporic departure that denies queer desire its culmination when Ruth travels away from Kari. Despite this, the “faraway city” in the closing pages of the novel is characterized as a place “where the palette was pure and bright,” an aspirational topography that offers through its pure light a promise for gay love that Mumbai’s gutter-like neighbourhood full of smog and stink fails to offer (116). This binary of the dry and freeing foreign city and the wet and violent Bombay / Mumbai is to be seen in both Divakaruni and in Patil. And this association of the distant diaspora with fairy-tale like possibilities is borne out in Patil first through Kari’s “snow globe with a winterscape inside” and then through the running trope of the “Fairytale Hair” commercial (48, 11). The intimacy of the diasporic setting to Kari’s personal imagination of queer romance and sexuality is evident from how she places the snow globe on her “bedside table”—a space both private enough to warm the heart and strategic enough to infuse dreams. The setting it offers is, I would argue, a stereotypical international cosmopolitan one: “Church, park bench, girl standing shin-deep in snow.” (48) And then the frightening possibility of the world turning on its head, a shift from this (foreign) winterland to perhaps the Indian reality, or a shift from the heteronormative paradigm to queer

desire, and the complete reversal it threatens is suggested when Kari says of the snow globe: “Tip the snow globe over and a blizzard of slow snow falls over church and bench and girl.” (48)

The perilousness of this dream that overturns itself over an inbuilt binary registers instantly with Kari: “What is it about snow globes that makes them fascinating and terrifying at once?” (48)

Kari lays out the terror of the situation where desire/ romance is contingently split over geographical and sexual binaries: “My heart lurches at the thought of the snow-globe girl waiting endlessly, with only the hope of a new snow blizzard to settle on her mantle when the next person tips her snow-globe world over. Not a gust of breeze may ruffle her skirt, not a bird may perch atop the steeple.” (48) The only way to avoid this violent arbitrariness is to shatter one’s way out of this binary and inhabit a geographical and sexual continuum. This sexual continuum that underlies politically meaningful yet ultimately superficial categories is suggested when Kari says to Lazarus, responding to his question about whether or not she was a “proper lesbian” (a significant statement that I will return to later in the essay), by saying: “I’d say armchair straight, armchair gay, active loner. The circus isn’t in my life. It’s in my head.” (79) Kari’s words, together with the impudence and sarcasm etched on her face, seems to suggest that the slots (“armchair straight, armchair gay, active loner”) laid upon the otherwise indistinguishable continuum of sexuality is only an artificial taxonomic imposition—a mere “circus” that is enacted intellectually (in the “head”) and that has no correlation with one’s lived sexual reality.

In reaction against this, queer sexuality begins to fit into a smoother continuum and its diasporization now reflects in the form of a larger global (geographic) connectivity. So this diasporic space (seemingly) more promising for queer sexuality, and actually out of Kari’s geographical reach, is shown to be intimately within her reach resting as it does in the form of the snow globe on her bedside table. By inhabiting this imagined diasporic state, and by allowing

through it a diasporization of queer experience, Kari is able to dwell in a productive and enabling continuum.

She marches out of the binary of the much-touted sexually liberating global city of diasporic aspiration (based on a simplistic assumption of sexual freedom in global metros) and the completely stifling domestic urbanscape of filth (represented by the stinking Mumbai of her everyday physical life). The notion of the sexually liberating global city is exposed as a falsity when the girl in the snow globe—implicitly located in a freeing international space—fails to escape and ultimately ends up piercing her finger while sewing, so that the dripping blood that spreads over the snow forms an exquisite bed of roses but of the most deadly kind that is the only fate of queer desire. And the vile claustrophobia of Mumbai is also contested and conquered when Kari fights its stench and grime indefatigably by playing the ‘Boatman’ (Patil 32–4, 97–8). Breaking free of both these extremities, she is able to imaginatively inhabit the diasporic state of mind (a state of global cosmopolitanism)—a state that proves enabling for her even as she apparently struggles with the confines of Mumbai. The diasporic state of mind and the geographic global continuum that it implies is even literalized by Patil. She portrays the world as one organic body where cities behave like connected parts which bleed at heart-rending severances (or departures). The grid of interconnected global cities is shown to be a throbbing organism, so that once Ruth leaves, Kari portrays Mumbai as palpitating with oppressive life-forces. She says while ill in bed and surrounded by the swirly etchings that characterize queer sexuality in the world of the novel: “A city alters when a person leaves. It drops drawbridges, grows new roads, looks hairy at dusk” (14). And localising further the interconnected maze-like nature of this integrated cosmopolitan world, she immediately continues to say: “Every day I wander into strange backyards and junk heaps and miraculously find my way out and back to

work or home again.” (14) Cruz-Malave and Manalansan write about how this kind of globalization (or global continuum of existence), despite the problems of diasporic cosmopolitanism (which I will attend to in detail below), “has also provided the struggle for queer rights with an expanded terrain for intervention” and how the “increased global visibility of queer sexualities and cultures in the marketplace has also generated multiple opportunities for queer political intervention through an equally globalized coalition politics” (1–2). United with the world and therefore with the distant Ruth through this global cosmopolitan continuum and diasporic imagination, Kari is able to think lovingly of Ruth, to imagine Ruth as connected to her, and to imagine Ruth as smiling when Kari refuses suicide at the end of the novel. This diasporization of queer experience and the emergence of an integrated transnational cosmopolitanism enable an emotionally rewarding connectivity and a politically productive gay activism.

The South Asian Queer Experience through the Global Diaspora

The diasporizing of the queer experience in these literary-cultural works under study is not simplistically an equating of the supposed liberatory potential of diasporic and of queer existence. What I will discuss now is how this is made even more glaringly obvious when, while diasporizing queer experience, these authors also controvert the homogenizing international rhetoric of queer sexuality with its teleological premise (that connects a regressive non-west to a gay-friendly modern west) and install instead a framework of South-Asian queer experience—unique, nuanced, ambiguous, and even subversive.

Global connectivity is critiqued as the disabling metropolitanism of gay politics in a whole range of works on the queer diaspora and on queer globalization. A useful summative discussion is to be found in *The Globalization of Sexuality*. Even while acknowledging the significance of global gay as an identity label necessary for state recognition, Binnie discusses the relevance and necessity, as also the problems and politics of formulating a “global gay subject” and whether it has “become as unsustainable as notions of global sisterhood among feminists” (38). Binnie outlines the long, fraught, and still continuing debate about “whether a global gay subject exists, and if so, how can it be characterized” (38). Sonia Katyal talks about the problems of an assumed “universality of legal constructs involving sexuality and culture” (38). Dennis Altman alleges that American “queer theory” is entirely Atlantic-centric. (42) David Halperin suggests that ‘queer theory’ has mainstreamed and blunted the disruptive potential of the queer. Among those who defend “[t]he notion of a common gay identity” are Peter Drucker who insists on the “commonality of a gay identity” across the world and “rejects the notion that it is Eurocentric to criticize Robert Mugabe’s persecution of gays in Zimbabwe” (37–8). Chong Kee Tan like some others points out that western gay culture is not a homogenous entity in the first place, and further shows the way various local contexts adopt selected elements of gay culture and politics from the western counterpart through a process of hybridization that results in a local “hybrid sexual culture” that is therefore not a western imposition. Referring to this contentious conversation, Binnie asks whether “the development of the global gay reflect[s] an evolutionary model of modernity whereby less developed countries are on an escalator of development that will eventually lead to the recognition of lesbian and gay rights as the end point of modernity, as a final stage of development” (38). Binnie points to the “strategic essentialism” of this identity of the global gay and asks whether this might “reflect a denial of indigenous or

folk forms of sexuality” and whether this is “the diffusion, or more sinisterly, the imposition of Anglo-American queer sexual norms” (38). This remains an issue that is irresolvable, contingent, and subjective. While the commonality of concerns across the gay population of various countries makes it politically and socially strategic for them to merge movements and demands, it is undeniable that such unities are often grounded in a relatively privileged (and often West-dependent) metropolitan continuity across the globe. The disparity between the actual lived realities of different queer demographics *within* the countries of South Asia, for instance, runs the risk of becoming invisible and irrelevant in this global discourse. This makes it essential for us to nuance our human understandings and scholarly explorations of local situations within countries/regions that are located outside the global north. The texts under discussion attend to these intricacies, questioning an elite cosmopolitan locus of gay identity by uncovering the fissures within.

Thus, even though for Kari located in Mumbai, the global cosmopolitan connectedness emerges as enabling in some ways, she still remains acutely vigilant of this elitist metropolitan privilege that ignores local realities. An awareness of the unique South-Asian sexual reality with its class inequality is reflected, however briefly, in the chapter titled “Love Song.” This follows the depiction of upper-class cosmopolitan sexual abandon among Billo, Delna, Kari, Orgo, Zap, and Vicky—an episode that escalates to the point of a group orgy (“a snake pit of entwined arms,” 76) and a gay encounter involving Kari and a stranger. This cosmopolitan format of heterosexual and queer intimate encounters that loudly requisitions global visibility is followed immediately by the portrayal of a very different reality. In the following chapter, Kari describes the people sleeping on the roadsides as Lazarus and she walked around at night, camera in hand. She observes:

They sleep on roadsides, under carts and benches, on platforms. Arms holding bodies, legs under legs, a defensive ball against the threats that whiz past at night. It is an appalling thing, this watching. If our subjects were wealthier, we'd be arrested for being peeping toms. As it is, our walk makes for arty b&w pictures of grim urban life. (78)

Lazarus asks Kari, "How do you think they reproduce out here?" To which Kari says, "Furtively. Semi-clad." (78) This offers a mordant critique of the international cosmopolitan rhetoric that clamours for visibility and commodity-consumption. This stark reality is offered to the contemplative reader as a contrast to the often fashionable figure of the "sexile" or the "gay cosmopolitan subject" (Wesling, 31), a figure that is premised on the manifest desire for public visibility and on the market-driven demands for commodification. Cruz-Malave and Manalansan explain:

In a world where what used to be considered the "private" is ever more commodified and marketed, queerness has become both an object of consumption, an object in which nonqueers invest their passions and purchasing power, and an object through which queers constitute their identities in our contemporary consumer-oriented globalized world. (1)

Globalization, then, has a "tendency to reduce the social and political significance of queer sexualities and culture to a commodity exchangeable in the marketplace" (2). Kari's narrative contrasts with this elitist fad for visibility the other reality of poverty-stricken life where privacy

is an unaffordable privilege and denied right, and visibility a forced imposition and inherited misfortune. This is the world of roadside dwellers who are forced to copulate in full view of strangers and whose misfortune becomes a commodity in itself when captured by the creative cameras of rich people (“arty b&w pictures of grim urban life”).

In a climactic scene closely following the walk, Kari most succinctly expresses the problem with the international rhetoric of gay rights. So when Lazarus asks her, “Are you, like, a proper lesbian?” Kari responds ponderously, “A proper lesbian?” and contemplates it further: “I roll the word ‘lesbian’ in my mouth and it feels strange there. Sort of fleshly, salivating, fresh off the boat from Lesbia, and totally inappropriate.” (79) A very similar discomfort with the homogenous global vocabulary that fits ill with the South Asian experience of queer sexuality is to be found, as Gopinath observes, in Mehta’s *Fire*, where Sita says to Radha that there is no word for their relationship in their [Indian] language. Gopinath talks about the unique expression of a South Asian queer sensibility in Chughtai and Mehta, very distinct from the western manifestations. Gopinath discusses the “depiction of queer female desire emerging at the interstices of rigidly heterosexual structures, detailing the ways in which desire is routed and rooted within the space of the middle-class home” on the South Asian cultural landscape. As opposed to the international rhetoric that insists on public visibility and legal identity, in the South Asian context characters “are able to access pleasure and fantasy through unofficially sanctioned sites that function as ‘escape hatches’ from the strictures of conjugal heterosexual domesticity.” In this location, “female same-sex desire and pleasure [is located] firmly within the confines of the home and ‘the domestic,’ rather than a safe ‘elsewhere.’” (Gopinath 153) Examples of such unique forms of bonding include the secret sexual relationships of Begum Jaan with other women within the privacy of her quarters (while her husband pursues young nubile

boys himself), and the private pleasures that Sita and Radha come to enjoy without the knowledge of their indifferent husbands. One example is the “trope of dressing and undressing”—a “performance of hyperbolic femininity,” an “erotic interplay” between Radha and Sita (that “references the specific modality of South Asian femininity in the popular Indian films like *Utsav* or *Razia Sultan*” and) that “encodes female same-sex eroticism within sites of extreme heteronormativity” (Gopinath 154). Other instances include Sita’s massaging of Radha’s feet at a family picnic, and “Radha[’s] rub[bing] [of] oil into Sita’s hair” (Gopinath 153–4). This latter is a form of intimacy that reappears in Divakaruni’s tale where Radhika similarly massages jabakusum oil into Mira’s hair—a form of loving and erotic intimacy (“her fingers make little circles” on Mira’s scalp and “trace the small dip behind each ear,” 186) that Mira conflictedly and painfully washes out of her hair while going on a date with Ajit in an avatar (a short lacy white dress, stiletto heels, “glittery crimson” lipstick) as contrived for her own self as it is shocking to Radhika (197).

This foregrounding of the locality of the South Asian experience reminds one of authors such as Michael Peter Smith (2001), John Tomlinson (1999), and Jon Binnie (2005) among many others who debate the need for a less fatalistic view of globalization, suggesting that one must dispense with the economic determinism of the globalization narrative, and instead emphasize the agency of the local, refusing to see the local “as authentic and embedded,” “devoid of agency and merely the victim of globalizing processes” (Binnie 35). Divakaruni’s story similarly interrupts the celebratory rhetoric of the cosmopolitan queer identity by interpenetrating Mira’s diasporic queer experientiality with flashbacks to and connectivities with her violent yet intimate South Asian past. Thus, Radhika’s demeanour reminds Mira constantly of her mother, and the closing thought at the end of the story when she paints a picture of her

final loving union with Radhika is infused with a grimy and tormenting reminder of many such unarticulated desires and longings that stem from her own unique cultural context. She says:

“I’ll lean my head into her shoulder. I’ll run my fingers over her scar the way one reads Braille. Perhaps I’ll find them there, the words for my night with Ajit. The water tank. The women swimming out into the Bombay ocean. For my mother, who also believed that to save the one you love, you have to give up your own life.” (208)

These, as opposed to the global categories of “armchair straight, armchair gay, active loner” satirised by Kari, are the words she admits to be longing for: “There are so many words I am searching for, I who had stopped believing in their possibility.” (208)

The imagined diasporic state conjured by queer experientiality therefore emerges powerfully in these works, pointing us to how a diasporization of the queer experience does not just offer the metaphor of the diaspora as a format for queer experience but also facilitates the problematization of the global gay imaginary. It makes possible the articulation of troubling and exorcised sentiments and subaltern realities from the South Asian cultural landscape, the expression of which is rendered difficult in the homeland, and the portrayal of which helpfully undercuts the cosmopolitan elitism of international queer rhetoric.

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