

“What Sort of Beast Was I?”

Thinking Beyond Gender in India

By RUTH VANITA

At some point in its development, any women's society must take one of two directions both at the level of thought and action, or, more likely, must work out some combination of both directions—(1) that of repairing the structures of heterosexual marriage and family, making them somewhat more equitable or (2) that of rethinking gender and sexuality to liberate both women and men into developing different kinds of family or collective living. People in a society always, incipiently, work out alternative forms of familial living. What a movement can do is to foreground and validate these forms and encourage others. Women's movements in India, have by and large, only taken the first direction—that of reforming marriage and the laws and social codes related to it. Their concentration on people as victims rather than agents and their reluctance to question gender and sexuality categories has fostered a stress on equity rather than liberation. Their self-characterization as

“women's movements” and dropping the word “liberation” is not fortuitous. Today, many people outside of women's movements are far more advanced in thinking through and enacting liberatory modes of life, relationship and community.

In all societies, people who are dissatisfied with the heterosexual system to the point of not wanting to gain the rewards of fitting into it, have devised different ways of opting out, individually and/or collectively. As Monique Wittig says in “One Is Not Born a Woman” (*The Straight Mind and Other Essays*) “The refusal to become (or to remain) heterosexual always meant to refuse to become a man or a woman, consciously or not.” Serena Nanda has examined hijra communities as experimenting with such ways of opting out. Hijras function as one model of difference. More than one older woman friend has told me, half playfully, half seriously “I'm a hijra,” which reminds me of Virginia Woolf's statement that she was neither a man nor a woman. Young Indian lesbian friends have

expressed to me feelings similar to my own, to the effect that they do not think of themselves as women or as men. As an experiment I asked many non-feminist women friends of differing classes, age and marital status whether they would like to be reborn as men or women, and have received the answer “Not as a woman.” Some have said they would like to be birds.

Unfortunately, the articulation of such feelings has often been silenced in feminist circles, by ascribing it to low self-esteem or even self-hatred. On the contrary, I would argue that it is related to high self-esteem, to the perception of oneself as not the complementary of a man, not wishing to play any role vis-a-vis a man that could be defined as womanly, and therefore, not being for any practical purpose, a woman. Emphasizing ones womanhood while opting out of a bad marriage produces the kind of victim narrative which so many modern Indian women fiction writers have endlessly repeated, where the body of the text is taken up with the struggle to get out and the text ends as soon as the heroine does get out, because there is logically nowhere for her to go except another marriage, suicide or lonely depression.

I shall briefly look at some other kinds of narrative produced historically by persons who opted out of heterosexual structures, and at the inheritance of these traditions by some modern Indian writers. Working on women bhakta and sant poets was a very enlightening experience for me (as is my current experience of working on the lives of European medieval saints), because it showed how their lives and work followed a trajectory of critique, protest and opting out of the heterosexual system, followed by the forming of alternative community and friendship networks. That bhakti movements criticized class, caste and religious differences and defied institutional authority of various kinds has often been demonstrated. Many inheritors of such movements exist today, for example, throughout the period of terrorism and police brutality in Punjab, the Radhaswami Satsang continued to function as a mass forum where Hindus and Sikhs met and worshipped together.

What is common to the legends of almost all bhaktas and sants, men and women, is that they refused to be good spouses and good parents.

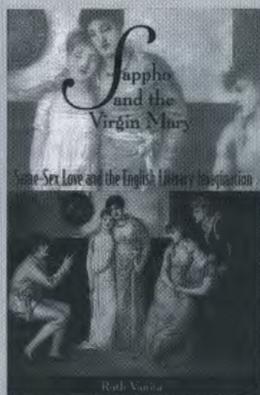
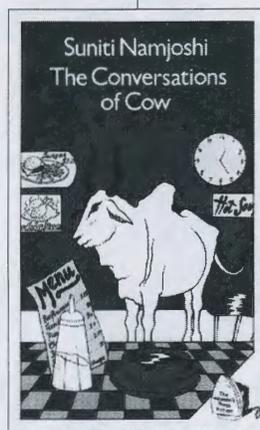
Many of the women refused to marry; those who married left their husbands. This feature is also found in the lives of medieval mystics in Europe, women who chose to be nuns rather than wives. Frideswide in medieval England is supposed to have performed a miracle which blinded her prospective husband and ended his pursuit of her; Avvaiyar in medieval Tamil Nadu is supposed to have performed a miracle which turned her into an old woman so that her prospective husband would stop pursuing her. Another medieval English saint, Wilgefortis, miraculously grew a beard to discourage a prospective husband. Women worshipped her under the name of “Uncumber” because they hoped she would uncumber them of their husbands. Both men and women altered gender

categories by trying to strip them of meaning—by walking naked, by growing their hair long, and by rethinking the terms. Thus twelfth century Kannada Virashiva poet Dasimayya writes:

Suppose you cut a tall bamboo in two; make the bottom piece a woman, the head-piece a man; rub them together till their kindle: tell me now the fire that's born,

is it male or female, O Ramanatha? (A.K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva*)

A new relation to the universe is often envisaged through the idea of being an animal. The last boundary to be crossed is that of the species. To acknowledge that we are animals and that that is the most important thing we have in common across class, caste, nation, gender lines is perhaps a necessary first step towards dissolving those lines. As the fourteenth century Sufi Nizamuddin Auliya remarked: “When a lion emerges from the forest, no one bothers to ask whether it is male or female” (*Manushi: Special Issue on Women Bhakta Poets*, January-June 1989). Hindu thought provides the space for such a move—all the deities are accompanied by nonhuman creatures, and some like Ganesh, are combinations of animal, human and divine. Mahatma Gandhi suggested that we look past our contempt, inherited from the British, for cow-worship, and consider the cow as a symbol of nature, a reminder of the need to respect other species from whom we take so much. In the writings of women sant poets, deer and cows often figure as images of victimized women; conversely, small creatures that can fly are symbols of the powerless that



Trikone readers might be interested in Ruth Vanita's book *Sappho and the Virgin Mary* (Columbia University Press, 1996) which focuses on same-sex love and the English literary imagination. In the book, Vanita uncovers same-sex love in works that range from the Romantic to the post-colonial. Vanita says the book began as study of Virginia Woolf as a Sapphic writer but it soon spread beyond those confines and reached far and wide from Sappho herself to Suniti Namjoshi, from Coleridge to Jane Austen in a study that Richard Dellamora (*Masculine Desire: The Sexual*

Politics of Victoria Aestheticism) calls “a must for any reader who is interested in the play of gender and sexuality in 19th and 20th century British literature.” Though it might be more appropriate to say English literature than British because Vanita explores the works of many non-British writers including Vikram Seth. The book is definitely an academic text but even those who are intimidated by footnotes will find many interesting stories that our college English literature classes did not always cover. For example how many people know of the remarkable Ladies of Llangollen who eloped together in 1778 and lived together for over fifty years and for whom Wordsworth composed a sonnet hailing them as “Sisters in love.” Or can we read Jane Austen's *Emma* as a story of her search for a substitute for her governess Miss Taylor? What, clueless? Well I guess you had better pick up *Sappho and the Virgin Mary!*

become powerful. Thirteenth century Varkari sant poet Muktabai writes:

*An ant flew to the sky
and swallowed the sun.*

Another wonder—

a barren woman had a son.

*A scorpion went to the underworld,
set its foot on the Shesh Nag's head.*

A fly gave birth to a kite.

Looking on, Muktabai laughed.

("Three Women Sants of Maharashtra," *Manushi* January-June 1989)

The barren woman's son here may well be an image for the text itself, as in the popular saying about Mirabai:

*One's name will live on through
ones work*

Consider this if you are wise.

Mira did not give birth to a son

Nor did she have any disciples.

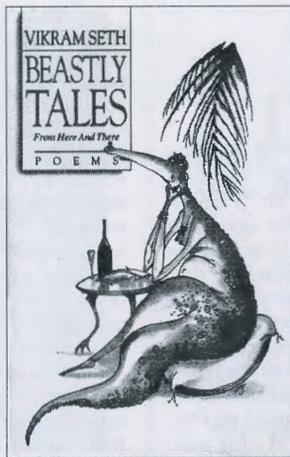
("Poison to nectar: The life and Work of Mirabai," *Manushi* January-June 1989)

Outside of institutional structures of the family and the formal educational system, these women nevertheless wrote narratives of power and creativity. They functioned as models for other women. Mahatma Gandhi cited Mirabai as an example for women. When a little girl was born to a follower, he said he hoped she would become a Mirabai. This is interesting, because normally a divorcee and a widow would not be cited as a model. There is a continuous tradition of such models and forums that women can appeal to, to legitimize opting out. For instance, one friend's grandmother who did not get along with her husband, joined the Brahmakumaris. This took up most of her time, she was almost never in the house, since she had taken a vow of celibacy she had no further sexual relations with her husband, and the special food she cooked not being to the palate of the family she ended up not cooking for anyone but herself. While the family resented this behavior, they found it hard to forbid it. Another friend's aunt left her husband to join a Jaikishen ashram in Maharashtra. In India today, as in medieval Europe, the institutions of fasting and pilgrimages provide women with ways of controlling and accessing familial and individual patterns of life and mobility.

These traditions have also been inherited and transformed textually, for instance, by contemporary poets Suniti Namjoshi and Vikram Seth. These two writers have immense popularity and appeal; they are readable and widely accessible. Their writings show a blend of various traditions, Indian and non-Indian, and they often use animal tropes to suggest crossings of the boundaries of race, gender, culture, nationality and sexuality. Less

containable than human beings in categories of nationality and gender, animals, as they have figured in Western and Eastern mythologies, literatures, and even popular jokes and stories often reveal the surprising commonality of apparent distinct traditions.

Suniti Namjoshi is a feminist writer from Maharashtra who has lived in Canada and England for a large part of her creative life. In her writings, the protagonist is generally named "Suniti" and inhabits a world populated by various human and nonhuman creatures and literal and mythical beasts who are in communication with one another. The Sanskrit first name functions in English as a marker of strangeness, and Suniti and those she meets are often rendered even stranger by unexpected attributes, as with the blue donkey who is the ultimate embodiment of meditative wisdom and Bhadravati, the lesbian cow—a comic send-up of the way Indian lesbians are often invisible to non-Indians. The attempts of cows and donkeys to interact with or keep



their distance from lordly tigers suggest the difficulties of survival in and struggle with the dominant culture. In one preface, Namjoshi connects her choice of a beastly persona with her questioning of gender stereotyping, and also with her pantheistic Hindu background wherein a beast is not inherently inferior to a human being because the same

spirit may in various reincarnations inhabit both human and nonhuman bodies. She concludes this meditation by asking "But what sort of beast was I?" (Preface to "The Jack-ass and the Lady." *Because of India: Selected Poems and Fables*)

Vikram Seth's narratives also draw on old Indian traditions of friendship between human and nonhuman animals such as Yudhistir and his dog, Ram and Jatayu, and Western traditions such as St. Francis and his wolves and lambs. In *Beastly Tales from Here and There*, each of the ten narrative poems is named for two creatures of different species. The asymmetry of these unconventionally matched pairs suggests the oddness of

alliances that are not within normative paradigms. These are poems about friendship—same-sex friendship and love, and also cross-sex friendship and love; in all of them, however, the question of gender, of "he" or "she" is rendered unimportant by the use of the species sameness and difference to mask it. One has to go back to check whether the elephant or tragopan were both male or the two mice both female. In Seth's 1994 libretto *Arion and the Dolphin*, the human-nonhuman friendship narrative, briefly and comically explored in *The Golden Gate*, appears centrally and seriously. It can be read as an ironical version of the old story of the faithful animal who dies for a human being; however, its romantic and passionate tone makes it susceptible to being read as a coded homoerotic test.

Thus, Indian society like other societies, has continuous traditions of creating non-victim narratives, narratives of opting out of gender categories and forming new kinds of alliances across various boundaries. We need to make those narratives, past and present, more visible, by researching them, writing about them and celebrating them. ▼

This article is excerpted from a longer essay in Seminar, Vol. 446, Oct. 1996.