

The Mythology of Female Sexuality: Alternative Narratives of Belonging

The concept of duty is overrated (Fire)

The swamiji's testicles have grown too big for his loincloth (Fire)

It's a dyke thing (Junky Punky Girlz)

Eswar Allah tero Naam (Junky Punky Girlz)

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BEFORE examining the work of cultural production in the South Asian immigrant community through two films, *Fire* and *Junky Punky Girlz*, and the mythological text of the *Ramayana*, I would like briefly to discuss the generational character of South Asian immigration. In *Desis in the House*, Sunaina Maira writes of the differences South Asian parents and children have about culture (Maira 2002). While parents have a fossilized sense of 'Indian culture', their children note the dynamism of cultural change in their visits to India. Maira writes that South Asian youth hold 'situational identities', by which she means that there is a strict compartmentalization of 'Indian' and 'American' identities (87). In *Junky Punky Girlz*, a young Indian woman works actively against this strict compartmentalization. Instead of feeling tension and guilt about straddling the two different worlds, being in a queer identity formation with her American friends and being South Asian, Anita tries to bring her

worlds closer together through the process of getting a nose ring. I will discuss *Junky Punky Girlz* further at the end of this article.

Maira argues that the ‘structure of feeling’ around being American cannot be disassociated from schooling, in which dominant social forms are reproduced. The two worlds of being American and South Asian that South Asian immigrant youth straddle cannot be explained by an authenticity/assimilation binary, since the circumstances are more complicated than such an explanation allows. South Asian youth display a sort of ‘symbolic authenticity’, in which religion becomes conflated with culture and drawn into what it means to be ethnic. Maira sees a level of nostalgia that is not a false consciousness, nor is it a ‘critical nostalgia’, by which she means a critique of dominant social relations at play in youth imaginings. This critical nostalgia is something Maira explores in her work with Youth Solidarity Summer (YSS), a week-long programme held in New York City. YSS attempts to give students an understanding that being radical is not opposed to being South Asian by exposing them to discussions from feminist, queer and labour-organizing cultures.

In *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai observes that ‘one of the central ironies of global cultural flows, especially in the area of entertainment and leisure’, is that they are often marked in the diaspora by ‘nostalgia without memory’ (Appadurai 1996:30). South Asian youth formations often display this nostalgia without memory as they express a desire for something lost. Maira develops this idea in the context of a desire to return to the homeland. She writes:

There is indeed a collective memory, but it is a recreated popular memory based on the myth of pure origins—a yearning to recover a presumed missing link—that is historical, cultural, personal. What this language of return indicates is that cultural recovery is most charged at moments when the naturalized basis of ethnicity or tradition is perceived in doubt, when the trope of return expresses a sort of collective mourning for a seemingly lost culture (Maira 2002:113).

Expressing a desire to return to some sort of ‘origin’, South Asian youth evince nostalgia for something they see missing from their lives in the United States. This desire to return may be seen as a desire to resolve conflicting identity issues.

In *Impossible Desires*, Gayatri Gopinath discusses the radical work of SALGA, the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association, in articulating a simultaneously queer and South Asian identity (Gopinath 2005). The actions of this group met with challenges from some members in the South Asian community, who believed in what Gopinath calls ‘the

impossibility of the female queer subject' (17). In 1992 the newly formed SALGA applied for permission to march in the India Day parade. They were turned down by the National Federation of Indian Associations (NFIA). Gopinath notes the exclusion of both queer and Muslim subjects from the space of Indian Hindu religious normativity (17). The NFIA also denied SAKHI, a group that campaigns against domestic violence, the right to march because they were a 'South Asian' and not an 'Indian' association (18). Seen as outside the spaces of heteronormativity by being more inclusive and working on gender politics, these organizations were denied representation in the India Day parade.

In critiquing heteronormativity, this essay examines a Hindu mythological text, the *Ramayana*, and two immigrant South Asian women's films, *Fire* and *Junky Punky Girlz*, to understand the representation of religious tradition and sexuality in contrast to Hindu fundamentalist misappropriations. In linking concepts and communities, the South Asian filmmakers discussed here provide counter-narratives to immigrant assimilationist narratives. Gender, racial identity and ethnic/religious tradition are not subordinated to an assimilationist narrative that demands renunciation of immigrant identities in favour of the promises of assimilation. Instead, women in these narratives—in understanding female sexuality as an intrinsic part of traditional culture—form relationships with other women, be they filial, convivial or sexual. These relationships critique paternalistic duty as a patriarchal hegemonic ideology not in the interest of women. References to Rama or the *Ramayana* in these cultural texts often question the concept of paternalistic duty represented in the Sita figure, and rewrite conventions to alter the *Ramayana*'s signifying potential within particular national contexts. Discourses on immigrant sexuality ask us to push the boundaries of American Studies into transnational diasporic and post-colonial contexts to appreciate fully the complexity of immigrant realities in the United States. I analyse these texts within these multiple contexts to appreciate their contestation of multiple nationalisms. Here the work of diasporic studies is useful, because it recognizes the uneven structure of power relations between nations and the need to articulate critiques against nationalisms that compete as hegemonic ideologies. From a gendered perspective, the competition over nationalisms produces a crisis in identity that may be reconciled by supporting one nationalism over another, or understanding that it is in women's interests to oppose nationalism altogether in favour of other modes of identity and belonging. It is towards this end that I understand films about same-sex desire as creating alternative identity formations.

These alternative formations contest the normative assumptions of nationalism that relegate women to the private sphere. In 'Identity and Its Discontents', Deniz Kandiyoti discusses the association of women with the home and the role of women in nationalist projects (Kandiyoti 1994). She argues that women's relegation to the private sphere is tenuous and the boundaries between public and private worlds are fluid and subject to redefinition (378). She writes: 'Women bear the burden of being "mothers of the nation" (a duty that gets ideologically defined to suit official priorities) as well as being those who reproduce the boundaries of ethnic/national groups, who transmit the culture and who are privileged signifiers of national difference' (376–7). Women may be relegated to the private sphere as mothers with a childrearing function under the control of patriarchy. Since women are seen as less assimilated, both culturally and linguistically, into national culture (whether or not they are immigrants), regulation of gender is central to the articulation of cultural identity and difference. Kandiyoti argues that placing women as boundary markers of their communities has a deleterious effect on their emergence as fully-fledged citizens of the nation-state (388). In their complicated role as bearers of culture, women in postcolonial societies may either participate in nationalisms or reject them. Kandiyoti cautions, however, that 'discourses valorizing the "private" as a site of resistance against repressive states or as the ultimate repository of cultural identity, should not let us overlook the fact that, in most instances, the integrity of the so-called "private" is predicated on the unfettered operations of patriarchy' (388). It is to be remembered, though, that, as bearers of culture, women may use the private sphere for political purposes. In *Fire*, the two sisters-in-law celebrate women's religious traditions and find a space of resistance to patriarchal codes in their relationship with each other. Patriarchy is very much operative in the narrative, but women find a space of resistance in so-called 'private' activities. *Fire*, in this way, represents the role of tradition in modern life and an anti-nationalist response to identity and culture.

In 'Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization', Jacqui Alexander critiques the assumptions of liberal feminism and renders them inadequate for explaining the Bahamas tourist economy (Alexander 1997). Relying on the works of postcolonial feminism, she shows how sexual identity is predicated on the effects of globalization and capitalism. She delineates the process by which neo-colonial states control sexuality to propagate tourism. She writes of the assumptions of nation and citizenship:

The nation has always been conceived in heterosexuality, since biology and reproduction are at the heart of its impulse. The

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citizenship machinery is also located here, in the sense that the prerequisites of good citizenship and loyalty to the nation are simultaneously sexualized and hierarchized into a class of good, loyal reproducing heterosexual citizens, and a subordinated marginalized class of non-procreative non-citizens . . . (84).

The family as a reproductive unit maintains the stability of gender roles and hierarchies and heterosexuality is demanded for 'good citizenship'. All those that do not fit into the heterosexuality that the nation imagines for itself are excluded from belonging to the nation. In contrast, cross-racial affiliation and same-sex desire lead to imaginative alternative forms of belonging in nations and diasporas.

My purpose in examining these texts and attendant scholarship is to try to understand broader questions about what it means to study immigrant texts in the US context. This essay builds on approaches used to understand the field of Ethnic Studies beyond the borders of the United States in order to comprehend immigrant realities more completely. My analysis of these texts, the *Ramayana*, *Fire* and *Junky Punky Girlz*, is intended to support the argument that American Studies within a transnational context is necessary for attending to the multiple-subject positions of immigrant realities. Interestingly, work on diaspora has always understood the need for this approach while American Studies as a field steeped in American exceptionalism has lagged behind in its understanding of the need to push beyond its own borders. In this essay, I extend scholarship at the intersections of these fields to examine traditions revised and reconceptualized in immigrant modernities. In considering traditions as they are revised in same-sex relationships, I do so with Nayan Shah's cautionary statement in mind: 'While the project of reclaiming and reconstructing the past is critical for our present struggles, let us not read too much of "us" today into our past. We may trap ourselves in the need of a history to sanction our existence' (Shah 1998:149).¹

In following this important prescription, I examine the *Ramayana* to the extent to which its rich diversity of traditions speaks to the interests of alternative sexualities within the contradictions of modernity. These contradictions lie in the alternating freedom of expression or repressions that modern systems of thought create. Just as the concept of liberal citizenship is riddled with contradictions, so is the extent to which modernity allows for freedom of sexual expression. Both are dependent on race, class and the ways in which subjects come into gendered formation as a result of those factors. It is important to know the history of traditions not because they sanction and legitimate the present, but because they may teach us how to live better with the contradictions of

the present. Also, traditions are not continuous from the past to the present. As the history and performance of the *Ramayana* indicate, the story has many variations. All the traditions of the *Ramayana* are a continually revised set of practices articulated and followed by groups of people so that no single performance or event takes precedent over another.

Subversive Sita: Revisionist Interpretations of the Ramayana

Romila Thapar begins her Foreword to Paula Richman's volume *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition* by recounting a story about the poet Intizar Hussain, who states that he had never known Ayodhya was an actual place on the map of India (Richman 2000).² It always existed for him in the realm of stories as a magical kingdom. After the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by Hindu fundamentalists claiming it was the birthplace of Rama and the proposed site for commemoration, Hussain and many others had to remap their knowledge of geography as writers. This essay is concerned with how Ethnic Studies, as a part of American Studies in the United States,³ is remapped by transnational concerns. A complex and nuanced understanding of South Asian American cultural texts requires an understanding of (1) postcolonial studies of the Indian subcontinent, (2) Indian diaspora studies, and (3) US Ethnic Studies,⁴ in order to arrive at a notion of multiple subjectivities that informs the South Asian immigrant to the United States. But before I examine these three field-specific approaches, I would like briefly to note the similarities in these texts along the axis of gendered identifications, which position them as alternative texts and in contrast to hegemonic national narratives of assimilation.

It is interesting that in both *Fire* and *Junky Punky Girlz*, creative production by immigrant artists locates Indian and lesbian characters in the context of religion, and particularly in relation to the Rama story. Given the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) championing of a single correct version of the Rama story in their destruction of the Babri Masjid,⁵ and in imposing criminal charges for a Buddhist retelling of the story,⁶ it is natural that artists and scholars have revised the story and reclaimed the multiplicity of the *Ramayana* tradition. Paula Richman's edited volumes, *Many Rāmāyanas* and *Questioning Ramayanas*, were both created as a critical response to the BJP's authorization of a singular and biased version of the *Ramayana* as historical fact (Richman 1991, Richman 2000). In *Questioning Ramayanas*, Richman writes: 'The BJP's criminal charges against a Buddhist retelling of Rama's story go against the basic nature of the Ramayana tradition. When a single group

argues it possesses the only “correct” version of Rama’s story, that group has misunderstood the Ramayana tradition’ (Richman 2000:21). Scholars of the *Ramayana* argue instead for multiplicity in studying, performing and understanding the *Ramayana*. In the *Many Rāmāyanas* volume, A. K. Ramanujan argues that we should abandon the notion of an authoritative and original *Ramayana*, and then many variants from it,⁷ since each performance of the *Ramayana* has a unique texture and fresh context. Instead, he argues: ‘In this sense, no text is original, yet no telling is a mere retelling’ (Ramanujan 1991:46).⁸

Revisionist interpretations often focus on the ending of the *Ramayana* and the example of Sita. In ‘When Does Sītā Cease to Be Sītā?’, Velcheru Narayana Rao writes: ‘In choosing to return to the earth: Sītā has accomplished two things: she has proven her chastity and demonstrated her independence, as well. It is both a declaration of her integrity and a powerful indictment against a culture that suspects women’ (Rao 2004:226). Informed by postcolonial feminist understandings, Sita’s character in the *Ramayana* in Indian tradition is often understood as speaking to women’s agency within patriarchy. In ‘Yes to Sita, No to Ram’, Madhu Kishwar interviews diverse Indian women to understand the popularity of the Sita figure. She finds that many women respect Sita for her morals while they denounce Rama for his pettiness in regard to her (Kishwar 2000).⁹ Kishwar demonstrates in her interviews the enduring legacy of the Sita figure among both Hindu and Muslim women’s communities. Women regard the Sita as a figure of strength in the face of harsh conditions and thus relate to her example.

Kishwar also examines responses of Indian men to Sita’s legacy. Mahatma Gandhi’s conception of Sita during independence envisioned modern-day Sita figures as women who do not channel all their energies into domestic duties but who become leaders in rebuilding a just, self-governing and exploitation-free society. She also writes of Sharad Joshi from Shektari Sangathana, who developed a creative use of the Sita symbol by inaugurating a Lakshmi Mukti campaign (Sita is believed to be the reincarnation of the goddess Lakshmi). In this campaign, Joshi asserted that the peasantry could not prosper until young women or *gharlakshmis* (household goddesses of prosperity) had the curse of Sita Maya removed. The curse could be removed, he argued, by assigning property in women’s names. By telling his story of Sita’s destitution during pregnancy, Joshi intended to convince the peasantry that they could not obtain their due from society until they redressed the wrongs of their own Sitas. By transferring land to their wives and daughters, they would be paying off a long overdue debt. Thus, subversive elements exist in the *Ramayana* tradition, challenging patriarchy in postcolonial India.

Understanding these alongside the United States immigrant or the Indian diasporic context is important, as one location may frame the possibilities of another, either positively—as in instances where anti-racist versions of the *Ramayana* in Britain may spark a similar understanding in another immigrant context, like the United States—or negatively—as in the possibility that communal riots in India diminish the practice of celebrating the *Ramayana* tradition in Britain. This approach also allows us to understand the diversity of the *Ramayana* tradition as one located in time and place, and thereby contests Hindu fundamentalists' belief that they possess the singular and correct version. In diasporic studies of the *Ramayana*, revisionist understandings frame the text within migrant contexts so that, when performed in Britain by a feminist group, the *Ramayana* is a critique of British racism and sexism. In Fiji the *Ramayana* speaks to issues of exile, suffering and struggle against an indentured system of labour, and divine intercession and triumph over evil.¹⁰

On 19 October 1979 an anti-racist women's community group known as the Southall Black Sisters performed a Ramlila in which the Ravana character took on the masks of British racism, with one face representing Margaret Thatcher, another representing neo-Nazi leaders and others representing the anti-riot police.¹¹ The *Ramayana* epic transplanted to the shores of Britain took on the task of speaking to Britain's domestic politics and policies of immigration legislation and restriction. The Southall Black Sisters were particular about creating a Ramlila that spoke to diverse populations in their community, from people expecting a pious interpretation of the *Ramayana* to Afro-Caribbeans and non-Hindus who felt no direct connection to the tale at first. In wanting to appeal to all populations, they created a Ramlila that simultaneously strengthened the community and opposed patriarchal ideologies. The burning of a Ravana effigy symbolized the desire to end racism in Britain. What united these populations was a history of British colonialism and their contemporary racial formations.

Issues of the postcolonial state affected the diaspora so that, after communal riots in India, it became less common in Southall for Hindus and non-Hindus to celebrate Diwali by exchanging boxes of sweets with each other. So, in choosing to perform a Ramlila, Southall Black Sisters were cautious not to delimit it in the interests of one community over those of another. Rather, in placing Ravana as the embodiment of British racism, they transplanted the appeal of the epic to all the immigrants who opposed racism in their daily lives. The performance itself revised many traditions of performance and had many subversive elements. In contrast to some dramatic traditions in India in which men play all the roles of the *Ramayana*, Afro-Caribbean or Asian immigrant women played all the

roles in the Southall Black Sisters' Ramlila. The performance diverged from tradition to include two jesters who spoke directly to the audience about the performance, all the while interrogating gender and linguistic assumptions in the scenes. The Ramlila in Southall paradigmatically represented how racial formation in Britain influenced the revision of the *Ramayana* in order to speak to the concerns of its communities.

Describing the power of the *Ramayana* epic in Fiji, John Kelly writes:

Certainly, for Fiji, and I strongly suspect, generally across the indenture colonies and elsewhere in situations of state-organized labor migrations the imaginative instruments of the 'Ramayana' became crucial tools for the moral reinscription of selves and world in terms not only more dignifying than those intrinsic to the plantation capitalist machinery, but also virtually, and sometimes actually, empowering of countercolonial initiatives (Kelly 2000:332).

The *Ramayana* narrative was performed and remembered in Fiji through Ramlilas and public readings. Fijian government proceedings held the *Ramayana* to be the holy book of Hindus (Kelly 2000:338).¹² Kelly argues that the *Ramayana* as a point of identification for Fijian Indians provided many ways of entry. One way to identify was by casting Rama as a divinity fighting enemies or Ravana as the demonic indentured system. But Fijian Indians also successfully cast India as the site of divine intervention and political deliverance. Another point of entry was that of being a sufferer in exile, and finding Sita among women who were at the crux of contradictions in the social and sexual life of indentured labourers. In twentieth-century Fiji, anxiety over how to establish permanence overtook anxiety over how to understand indentured histories and the desire to return to India. Thus, the performance of the Ramlilas also shifted. The *Ramayana* as text served to provide peace, even to followers who found themselves in permanent exile.

In April 1998 an exhibition was held at Columbia University's Low Memorial Library called 'Sita in the City', showing artwork and photography by South Asian community members featuring the image of Sita in New York City. The curators of the exhibit, Anne Murphy and Shana Sippy, also published an article in *Manushi* called 'Sita in the City'. In the article, they wrote that several exhibits were 'a window into the ways in which communities adapt and reformulate "tradition" in new environments' (Murphy and Sippy 2000). The exhibition, however, elicited a range of responses that are quoted in the article. A member of SAKHI called Sita 'a lousy role model for women' (17). Others, like Karna Singh, a member of the Raj Kumari Cultural Center (an Indo-Caribbean cultural organization), spoke of Sita as 'the most prominent

role model held up by Hindu priests and the orthodoxy in Guyana', even when cultural continuity with the religion was hard to maintain in the Caribbean (17). Singh notes a similar process in the United States and also the influence of the figure in more 'secular communities'. Shamita Das Dasgupta of Manavi, a New Jersey-based group against domestic violence, said: 'Sita is a battered woman. She is a pawn in the power games—honor, nation, marriage, female chastity, fidelity, heterosexuality, abduction, revenge, rejection, class, military intervention and bravery—that men play' (17). An unnamed female artist, however, sees Sita as 'somebody who's positive, whose quietness... is a strength... Rather than being subservient, she finds an area of largeness within herself...' (20). Many children's comments especially reflected that they saw Sita as 'fearless' and an emblem of Shakti because she could 'carry a bow and arrow no man on earth could' (20). A survivor of domestic violence wrote: 'I admire Sita's strength in bearing life's difficulties head-on, raising her kids herself without support of her husband, and not falling apart' (21).

The very malleability of Sita's representation from a pawn to a figure of agency calls for a serious re-evaluation of her signifying potential. In the immigrant context, the *Ramayana* is often performed at cultural and religious schools, functions and public events. For young girls performing and viewing these plays, the figure of Sita as an emblem of sexual and cultural purity may be deployed as a role model to guard against sexual activity outside of marriage, seen as an assimilative sign of Americanization. Sita's tests of marital fidelity may function as prescriptions against pre-marital sexual conduct for young girls. For these girls, this model is often represented as a way of being 'Indian'. Male honour, as it were, seems to be protected by the rigid control of female sexuality. In this way, Sita in an immigrant setting seems to speak to issues of assimilation defined as sexual conduct outside the rigid norms of family control. Referring to notions of normative heterosexuality among young girls in the Filipino community, Yen Espiritu discusses a problematic that is useful here (Espiritu 2001). She argues that there is a difference in how immigrant and non-immigrant families sanction girls' sexuality. While both rely on 'good girl/bad girl' dichotomies, immigrant families may discipline girls as national and racial subjects as well as gendered ones, so that young girls who disobey parental strictures are often regarded as 'non-ethnic', 'untraditional', 'radical', 'selfish' and 'not caring about the family'. Thus, there is something like 'cultural authenticity' ascribed to girls who follow parental strictures, so that family honour and national integrity are located in the group's female members. Because policing women's bodies gets linked to moral superiority in this way, young women face numerous restrictions on personal decision-

making, autonomy and mobility. So it would seem that, for young immigrant women, unlinking sexuality from racial/national honour is a critical step to realizing their sexualities as something other than rigid control. In this way, race and sexuality are interwoven so that non-racist conceptualizations of community allow for progressive notions of sexuality. The patriarchal regulation of women's sexuality in an immigrant context may result in an individualized and pathologized notion of one's sexuality, as it deviates from both immigrant nationalisms and dominant US nationalist constructions of normative heterosexuality. Alternatively, this distance from the national norm may produce community formations that understand sexuality as a set of social relations rather than as an individualized form of desire.

For the *Ramayana*, Sita's refusal to be tested speaks to these issues. Rama puts Sita through three tests of fire. In the final test, she refuses to be subjected to constant tests of purity, and she asks Mother Earth to swallow her and attest to her purity of conscience. While popular ideologies portray Sita as a figure of undying love and loyalty to Rama, many critics see her as capable of questioning Rama and his policies of rule, and focus on Sita's own qualities of nurturance in appropriate contexts, as in her ability to raise her sons. Revising the epic in an immigrant context, thus, involves recasting ideas of sexuality outside the confines of traditional patriarchal notions that seek to confine women's sexuality for procreative purposes within family honour. This may involve same-sex identifications and affiliations that cannot be reduced to hegemonic national narratives of heteronormativity and belonging. In this way my analysis of *Fire* and *Junky Punky Girlz*, as texts derivative of the *Ramayana*, understands the need to recast traditional practices along lines of same-sex identification and affiliation. The *Ramayana* can be recast to speak to notions of queer social formations. Here, I understand queer social formations not so much as a project of gay or lesbian sexual identity, although that constitutes a part, but as those that question the bounds of racism in constructing sexuality, and offer an alternative notion of sexuality and community that is inclusive of a range of sexual identifications. Both Chandan Reddy and Roderick Ferguson have written of queer of colour social formations (Reddy 1998, Ferguson 2004). Reddy demonstrates a queer of colour critique by arguing that racism also manifests as gender and sexual regulation and that gender and sexual differences variegate racial formations. Ferguson articulates the need to understand scholarly alliances as a mainstay of a queer of colour critique. He writes in *Aberrations in Black*: 'Queer of color analysis must examine how culture as a site of identification produces such odd bedfellows and how it—as the location of antagonisms—fosters unim-

aged alliances' (Ferguson 2004:3). Thus, this essay furthers communication and affiliation between communities organized around religion and around sexuality. Ferguson's statement reminds us to consider how those who may be considered odd bedfellows may also turn out to be productive and unimagined allies.¹³ A politicized use of the *Ramayana* would position Sita's sexuality as regulated by male immigrant honour. Her refusal to be tested speaks to her understanding that testing is a regulative function of patriarchy and that she accepts an alternative understanding of her sexuality in identification with a gendered understanding of affiliation.

A Critique of Assimilation: Mothering, Nation and Feminist Revisionist Narrative

I have shown how mothers are imagined to be in the service of the nation in reproducing technologies of heteronormativity. Also, 'good citizenship' requires the propagation of heterosexuality. Citizenship is usually gendered male, and this creates a contradiction for female subjects, who serve as the repository of identifications that need be subordinated for identity formation of the male citizen to take place. In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe uses the concept of identification in psychoanalysis to discuss the process of identification with the nation-state that assimilation entails. She writes:

I would argue that the subject position of the American student/citizen is coded, narrated and historically embodied as a masculine position. We might say that the American nationalist narrative of citizenship incorporates the subject as male citizen according to a relationship that is not dissimilar to the family's oedipalization, or socialization of the son. In terms of a racialized subject, he becomes a citizen when he identifies with the paternal state and accepts the terms of this identification by subordinating his racial difference and denying his ties with the feminized and racialized 'motherland' (Lowe 1996:56).

How does this contradiction of identification play out for women? Interestingly, the *Ramayana*, *Fire* and *Junky Punky Girlz* are all narratives that demonstrate identification with mothers. In the *Ramayana*, Sita returns to Mother Earth and, when read in an immigrant context, the text may speak to a rejection of the state as paternalistic guardian, and identity as conforming to the notion of a universal citizen-subject without a sense of racialized and gendered differences. In embracing Mother Earth, Sita embraces her difference from a masculinist narrative that is regulative of

her gender through her sexuality as a woman in patriarchy. This masculinist narrative is regulative not only of gender but also of class and caste concerns. Robert P. Goldman, in 'Resisting Rama', writes of a central problematic in Rama's policies of prioritizing adherence and allegiance to Brahmanic peers over and above those he considers generational and gender subordinates (Goldman 2004:35). Another problematic Goldman describes is Rama's adherence to the given word: he defends his act of killing a man simply because he has given his word to do so. Paula Richman writes critically in *Rāmāyana Revisited* of Rama's killing a shudra who practises asceticism as a way for Rama to safeguard his links to a Brahmanic community. Sita can be seen as a woman who refuses to be tested because she does not believe in constant scrutiny of her fidelity and opts out of a patriarchal scheme in which her character is reduced to a series of tests. Instead, she chooses her maternal roots and finds a sense of belonging there. In her struggle with the imperatives of traditional duty, Sita finds in her maternal roots the nurturance that substitutes for her paternalistic relationship to Rama.

In *Fire* Radha and Sita reject masculinist authority, and Radha remembers her mother in flashbacks in which her mother asks her to 'see without looking' or to see the world differently. It is these flashbacks that give her the courage to conceptualize the end of an oppressive marriage and the beginning of a more productive same-sex relationship. Mothering, as it were, is instructive in reconceptualizing and recasting the meaning of tradition. The flashbacks occur during key scenes in the narrative, usually when Radha is trying to comprehend her new-found feelings for Sita. Radha, as the supposedly more traditional and elder wife in the household, finds that it is her job to instruct Sita in traditional duties and sentiments of the household. And yet it is Radha who is often the agent of change in the film, as she identifies with her mother's prescription to 'see without looking'.

I read *Fire* as an immigrant text for several reasons. First, a North American immigrant filmmaker wrote and produced it, and it was hugely popular in the United States across many types of audiences. But, more importantly, I read it as an immigrant text because I understand its productive tensions to counter assimilative gestures. As Sita enters a new household, she is expected to conform to its ways and adopt patriarchal and national standards of living, but, instead, she finds with Radha a shared refusal of masculinist notions of assimilation in favour of a maternal connection to pleasure in sexuality. This may be read, in an immigrant context, as a refusal to identify with state-sponsored assimilation programmes that would neutralize the 'difference' of Indian tradition to fit into European-American standards of what is considered as

appropriate within tradition.¹⁴ Such programmes also assume the universality of the male student or citizen/subject and therefore do not acknowledge gendered difference or difference along the lines of sexual identity. In identifying with mothers in these narratives, the characters refuse identification with a paternalistic state as guardian and neutralizer of difference and instead ‘assimilate’ into each other the ‘difference’ of Indian tradition and the ‘difference’ of queer cultures from nationalist notions of normative heterosexuality. In the interaction of minority cultures to each other, the texts I examine underscore the need for identities differentiated from the national narrative of belonging situated as regulative heterosexuality. Through a mutual but differentiated distance to the national norm of heterosexuality and notions of family and tradition, these texts offer an understanding of alliances that refuse to be incorporated into what national patriarchal notions consider as legitimate forms of bonding. By providing each other an alternative to patriarchal tradition, minority communities in these texts instantiate alternative narratives of belonging. Same-sex identifications with mothers or with other women are central to this concern, as notions of citizenship are often gendered as masculine.¹⁵

In *Junky Punky Girlz*, Anita refuses to link her role in educational institutions exclusively with heterosexual coupling as her mother asks, but instead finds a way to reconcile her mother’s wishes for an understanding of Indian tradition with her friends’ conceptualization of identity and affiliation in same-sex unions. By piercing her nose within a queer community, Anita reconciles her desire to deploy traditions connected to both her mother and her friends as she secures an Indian traditional practice within queer culture.

In all three narratives, same-sex identification and attraction is posited as an alternative to masculinist narratives of nation, citizenship and duty. In alternative modes of belonging, women find community in revising traditional practices to speak to same-sex attraction but they also find horizontal affiliations with other women that allow them to recast the lessons of their mothers.

Fire: Hindu Fundamentalist Fervour, Feminist Fury and ‘Traditional’ Queer Critique

The film *Fire* presents repressed male sexuality as literally capable of bursting through the traditional garments of religious identity while same-sex female sexual expression leads to a critique of patriarchal misappropriations and regulation of female labour and desire. Traditional duty is discussed in this film, so that it both rehearses and reconceptua-

lizes traditional gender roles for Radha and Sita (their names are references to Krishna's main consort in the *Mahabharata* and to Rama's wife in the *Ramayana*) as they find love in a same-sex relationship.

In *Fire*, one of the heroines is significantly named Sita and this character's relationship to another heroine, Radha, is explored to attend to same-sex desire. In naming both characters after goddesses, the film does more than make reference to Hindu mythological texts. It actually positions same-sex desire in the context of Hindu religious traditions. By doing so, it argues that same-sex desire is intrinsic to Hindu and Indian cultural traditions and thereby it questions Hindu fundamentalism's misrepresentations of traditional culture as heteronormative and patriarchal. *Fire* was written and directed by Deepa Mehta, and released in 1996. Deepa Mehta is an immigrant filmmaker based in Canada, and she focuses on issues in India for her films. Same-sex attraction is explored in *Fire* while political and violent sexual relations during the 1947 Partition are explored in *Earth* (1998). Her work raises an interesting problematic: why do immigrant filmmakers and writers explore themes in India rather than in their immigrant locales? And, moreover, why look at a text based in India from an immigrant perspective? The answer seems to be that we cannot understand South Asian American immigrant life in isolation from happenings in India. Immigrant connections between the two countries are kept alive through constant communication, and processes in both places impact each other. Moreover, it is important to understand the issues the film raises within a particular national context. Counter-hegemonic critique usually emerges in relation to a particular hegemonic formation that may also be a national hegemonic formation. Understanding the Indian debates does not necessarily give us a picture of a more 'authentic' viewing of the film. Rather, it gives us an understanding of some national concerns that are affected by both conservative and progressive politics in the place where the film is set. These concerns need to be studied apart from debates that circulate in the United States in order to appreciate the film's reception in India. Doing so decentres the United States as the only viewing point of the film, and demonstrates how both national and transnational contexts are critical for understanding the formation of sexualities.

When the film was released in 1996, it sparked riots by the Shiv Sena Hindu fundamentalists, who destroyed movie theatres that were showing the film. Protesters in Mumbai were known to smash ticket windows, and beat up audiences.¹⁶ The film was removed from theatres in New Delhi and Mumbai after violent attacks on them by Hindu fanatics in December. Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray insisted that the protests would cease if the names of the film's heroines were changed to Shabhana

and Saira from Radha and Sita. Thackeray's statement echoes sentiments among Hindu fundamentalists that same-sex expression is a Muslim import in India and not a part of Hindu traditions. The Censor Board ultimately argued that it would allow the film if Sita's name was changed to Nita to avoid reference to the *Ramayana's* Sita, and the film was released in Hindi with this change. Clearly, fundamentalists and officials in the Censor Board were in agreement that the name 'Sita' not be used in a film about same-sex attraction.

More than just the Sita name, however, the film *Fire* has an intertextual relationship with the *Ramayana* in other ways. This relationship to the *Ramayana* in a film about same-sex relations infuriated the Hindu right while it inspired only lukewarm support from most Indian feminists. The debate Indian feminists had to deal with was one that cast sexuality as a western import. In an analysis of the debates in India in 'Tracking "Same-sex love" from Antiquity to the Present in South Asia', Rosemary George and her colleagues write:

... public statements from Hindu right wing spokespersons and even moderate commentators make clear [that], while there is a general acceptance and even valorization of strong attachments between the same sex, the overt sexualization of such relations is considered a perversion brought into the country by westernizing forces. The Hindu right usually represents homosexuality as an evil of westernization combined with what is understood as the general contagion of Islam (George *et al.* 2002:8).

The misappropriation of the *Ramayana* by Hindu fundamentalists is challenged in *Fire* through the alignment of same-sex attraction with Hindu traditions.

Feminists in India did not entirely appreciate the film, but showed unenthusiastic appreciation in counter-protests against the denunciation of the film by Hindu fundamentalists. In fact, many feminists in India critiqued the film and found it exploitative of both religion and sexuality. Some felt it 'was not a film made for Indian audiences' (Sukhthankar 2000:16). Ashwini Sukhthankar writes: 'The symbolism was pureed like baby food, the metaphors of *Fire* so obviously labeled "For export only". The film had even less to offer Indian lesbians' (16). Many criticized the filmmaker for retreating into the 'safe shelter of her heterosexuality' and not promoting the film as a lesbian film. Some critics opposed the film because it did not probe the

profound guilt, shock, fear, anger, shame and crippling ambivalences and equivocations and other anarchic and threatening emotions that

accompany sexual practices generally considered perverted, criminal and taboo . . . The sisters in law are too busy looking beautiful as they spread saris to dry on their terrace while the exoticized tapestry of congested, ritual ornamented middle class life somehow stitches itself into being within the household and the lanes below.¹⁷

This critique does not consider that Deepa Mehta, despite her stated authorial intentions, may have situated a film about same-sex attraction precisely within the confines of middle-class life in order to expose the patriarchal rigidity that most women experience in their lives if not in their families. Also, if the argument is turned around, the relative ease in the expression of sexuality may be considered as a positive force for the visibility of alternative sexualities rather than as negative one. Madhu Kishwar wrote: 'You don't have to be a Shiv Sainik to feel offended and hurt by the gratuitous insults aimed at Indian culture in this crude caricature' (Kishwar 1998). Instead of focusing on the film as exploitative of lesbian thematics, critics may attend to precisely why the film has 'shock value' and what exactly it subverts. My argument is that, rather than being gratuitous or exploitative, the film carefully deconstructs the *Ramayana's agnipraksha* (trial by fire scene) to offer a subversive rendering that depicts what Kishwar calls the 'two wronged women' of Indian tradition as companions. By posing same-sex desire in the context of Hindu traditions, it subverts Hindu fundamentalist understandings of the film. While Indian feminists are correct in wanting a more diverse array of depictions of lesbians in Indian and diasporic cinema, *Fire* may be seen as a starting-point in that it precisely anticipates and undercuts the Hindu fundamentalist critique of it. To say, as Kishwar does, that 'for Mehta, liberation can only come by overthrowing the stranglehold of Indian tradition' is to misunderstand the film. Kishwar uses the line in the film in which Sita says to Radha, 'There is no word in our language to say what we are to each other', as evidence that the film belies the notion that only western sensibilities and modernities are able to capture lesbian desire in language. What she overlooks is that, by remaining unnamed, same-sex desire has more mutability in its expression than if it is captured in language and named 'lesbian'. Certainly, the women are lovers, friends and sisters-in-law, all of which are easily translatable into Indian languages. What Kishwar fails to consider is that the film does not rely on the 'coming out' narrative of western sexualities and modernities to understand naming them as 'lesbian' as quintessentially progressive; rather, the film understands same-sex desire in India as rooted in the traditions of the family and religion. What Sita's comment may also signify is that it is not just their sexuality but also the gendered relationship between them that is difficult to signify in language. They

are like a loving ‘husband and wife’ to each other, as they miss out on this type of relationship in their actual marriages. In ‘On Fire’, Gayatri Gopinath discusses the term ‘third nature’ in translation to talk about how homosexuality is often described in Indian languages (Gopinath 1998b). She argues that the term implies reference to a person not only in terms of his or her object of sexual affection but also in terms of gender embodiment. As an example, she cites the ‘Krittivasa Ramayana’, in which two widows are described as ‘living together behaving as husband and wife’. In one translation, it appears as living together ‘in extreme love’, which changes the meaning and the gendered component of their relationship. Rosemary George *et al.* remark that the project of understanding same-sex relations in India cannot be considered as part of a universalizing discourse of gays and lesbians but instead ‘as part of an ongoing effort to understand practices and relations that cannot be categorized (without egregious distortion, that is) under the general heading of gay, lesbian or even homosexual’ (George *et al.* 2002:8).

Some feminists who reacted to *Fire* as gratuitous and exploitative may have been referring to scenes in which the *Ramayana* is referenced. At one point in the film the grandmother and servant are found watching videos of the televised version of the *Ramayana*. In this scene, Sita interrupts them as she also interrupts but does not catch Mundu masturbating. Mundu explains the scene they were supposedly watching to her. He says the Goddess has just told Lord Rama: ‘let the flames be my witness, if I am unpure the flames will destroy me, but if I am not they won’t touch me.’ The scene is ironic, as Mundu has just barely escaped being caught masturbating as he watches the television with Biji, the elderly mother of Ashok and Jitin. In another scene, the *Ramayana* is performed on stage for the elder husband Ashok and his religious community of men. Each time the *Ramayana* narrative is referenced in *Fire*, it is always the *agnipraksha* scene, or Sita’s trial by fire, that is depicted. Rather than reading this as an instance of gratuitous exploitation, the scenes may be understood to mark the point that all the characters in the film—including the male characters—deal in some way with middle-class restrictions on the expression of their sexuality. Ashok addresses it in his vow of celibacy to his swami and the self-imposed restriction of his sexuality in his married life. Jitin accommodates it in his relationship with a Chinese girlfriend, Julie, who refuses Indian traditional life with him and his family and opts for an American-accented future in Hong Kong cinema. Radha and Sita deal with the confines of a patriarchal family and its restrictions on their expression of same-sex desire and sexuality. The servant, Mundu, responds to his unrequited desire for Radha by appropriating prohibited spaces in

expression of his sexual desires. The grandmother, as head of a patriarchal family, deals with her own muteness and inability to express patriarchy's rules by ringing her bell or stomping her cane. She has to tolerate Mundu's expressions of sexuality in her presence without adequate recourse to complaint. Unrequited desires are central to the lives of all the characters. That Sita and Radha are the only ones in the family depicted as having a sustaining relationship speaks to their contestation of patriarchal norms and thus irks the patriarchal representatives in the film, Ashok and his mother.

While most critics in India were dismissive of the film for lacking the aesthetic qualities they desired and exploiting traditions in religion and sexuality, some critics seized on the aspect of the film's signifying potential to revise traditions in the interest of same-sex desire. The film sparked many counter-protests to the Hindu fundamentalist understanding of the film. Ashok Row Kavi said the fundamentalist protests were the latest form of 'gay bashing in homophobic India'.¹⁸ But rather than reading homophobia as intrinsic to India, he countered the Hindu fundamentalist arguments by insisting that laws against homosexuality were in fact British imports. He said:

Our criminal laws on homosexuality were bequeathed to us by the British, who had a Christian view of things, and based it on the King James Bible . . . Hinduism on the other hand defines sex as one of the three ways of attaining salvation. Hinduism does not run away from sexuality and does not pass judgment on people who have different preferences.¹⁹

Thus, the counter-protests turned the Hindu fundamentalist argument around by labeling homophobia as an import, but understanding homosexuality in the context of Indian traditions.

Religious traditions, in fact, play an important part in the film in scenes that subvert patriarchal codes. This element was missed for the most part in critiques of the film in India. In contrast to Indian feminists, who mostly saw gratuitous uses of religion in the film, diasporic critics of sexuality located in the United States sought to read the subversive use of religious traditions depicted in the film. Gayatri Gopinath read the women's *Karva Chauth* rituals as a subversive use of tradition in that the women are more interested in dressing for each other than for their husbands who occupy themselves in other pursuits (Gopinath 1998b:639).²⁰ Ashok is busy with his swami while Jitin is with his Chinese girlfriend. On the morning of *Karva Chauth*, Sita says: 'Isn't it amusing—we're so bound by customs and rituals. Someone just has to press my button marked tradition and I start responding like a trained

monkey.’ Even though Sita calls attention to the way in which traditions may be performed automatically as a trained response without too much thought, their actual performance of the rituals shows that they thoughtfully appropriate the tradition towards the erotics of same-sex desire. As the moon rises, the women meet on a courtyard lit with small fire lamps called *diyas*, and they complete the ritual. Fire as a symbol works as an understanding from Hindu tradition that it may illuminate truthful desires as the women’s love for each other is kindled. Radha permits Sita to break the fast and therefore performs the role of her husband in giving her blessings and quenching her thirst with a glass of water.

Rahul Gairola sees the final scene in which Radha is almost immolated as a subversive use of the *Ramayana* theme (Gairola 2002). In ‘Burning with Shame’, she compares the symbolism to that of the *Ramayana* so that Radha, like Rama’s Sita, emerges unscathed in her revelation of her alternative sexuality to her husband Ashok. The fact that diasporic critics saw more subversive uses of religious traditions in the film than their Indian counterparts did is perhaps explained by the fact that feminists in any location must first grapple against hegemonic ideologies of the nation in which they are located. In countering Indian homophobia from the religious right, Indian feminists responded by wanting more and better depictions of conditions for lesbians in India. Diasporic critics, meanwhile, dealt with an American audience who sought in the film some affirmation of western progress and liberalism. To counter this, diasporic critics situated their critiques carefully in the context of Indian religious traditions. As Gayatri Gopinath shows in her piece ‘On Fire’, critics like Roger Ebert sought to construct India as a pre-modern space where sexuality progresses along westward lines. Gopinath reads queer female desire in the film as emerging out of a specific subversion of heteronormative codes that signify as spaces of female homosociality and desire. Gairola reads a subversive use of the *Ramayana* and of *sati* in the final scene (Gairola 2002:319).

Junky Punky Girlz: Reviving Tradition in Queer Formations and Contesting Assimilation

The theme of same-sex attraction and references to the *bhajans* of Rama appears in a film by US immigrant filmmaker Nisha Ganatra called *Junky Punky Girlz* (1995). The central character Anita’s cultural purity may be connected to the Sita story in that ‘cultural purity’ is what is at question for her in her nose-piercing. Like many immigrant young women, Anita sees herself as needing to negotiate and choose between what seem like

‘Indian’ and ‘American’ cultural affiliations. In this case, the ‘Indian’ affiliation is with her mother, with whom she is in communication over the phone. She seeks advice from her mother regarding which side of her nose to pierce, and she discovers it is more traditional for Indian women to pierce their noses on the left side. The American affiliations are with her two friends, both of whom have their noses pierced on the right side and one of them, Dara, refers to it as a ‘dyke thing’. Understanding *Junky Punky Girlz* requires an understanding of the Indian context, as students are inevitably bound to ask what nose-piercing means in the Indian context. The film also involves understanding queer ethnic formations in the United States, as Anita negotiates her nose-piercing with her Jewish and African-American friends. Little is revealed about the friends and their interior lives as they help Anita deal with her cultural identity. Nevertheless, the film deals with the specificity of Indian cultural traditions within an immigrant context, and how interaction with other minority subjects entails a non-coercive negotiation of culture. This approach is directly opposed to notions of state-sponsored assimilationist practices within institutions such as schools,²¹ which do sometimes purposefully delimit and deny Indian tradition. Instead of positioning the nose-piercing in the context of the ‘two worlds’ metaphor whereby something of the Old World must be renounced while something is gained in the New World, Anita negotiates multiple worlds within the US immigrant context in order finally to reconcile what is characterized as the tradition associated with her mother with tradition in queer culture. Thus, Anita and her friends articulate an alternative modernity that recognizes the role of alternative traditions in modernity. In doing so, they must scrutinize the dichotomy in which the Indian mother is posed as an emblem of ‘tradition’, and a queer social formation is posed as a strictly ‘modern’ sensibility. This is too simplistic a dichotomy, since Anita’s mother also inhabits the contradictions of modernity (in offering a developmental narrative of normative heterosexual fulfillment through education at a university) while her friends also inhabit a set of queer traditions. (Within queer communities, nose-piercing signifies an acceptance of plurality and tolerance.)

My analysis of the film in detail will illuminate how I understand the meshing of queer and Indian traditions. The short film (11 minutes) begins with Anita, a young South Asian woman, staring at herself in the mirror and imagining a nose ring on her face. It cuts to Anita asking the nose-piercing salesperson, ‘What side did I say?’ ‘You said the left’, she replies. Her friends Mindy and Dara say, ‘Left is best’, and ‘Always to the left’, implying that Anita is not just piercing her nose but making a progressive political statement. Anita, however, seems conflicted and runs

out of the parlour, calling her mother on her mobile phone. She asks her mother if her nose is to be pierced on the right side or the left. Anita looks at a photo and says she cannot tell which side it is in the photo. We do not know whose photo she is looking at, but obviously this image has some significance to her and her mother. Her mother, though, discourages the piercing, saying, 'Piercing your nose will not make you any more Indian'. Instead she offers some suggestions that will make her 'more Indian' in her mother's eyes, like meeting a guy from medical school or taking Hindi classes at university or joining the Indian Student Union. Thus, her mother represents heterosexual coupling, language and fraternity with other young students as more culturally authentic markers of Indian identity. She mentions that 'there are so many nice boys around and you are into these junky punky things...I don't like it.' In her mother's understanding, nose-piercing is represented as the reverse of heterosexual coupling and vaguely a marker of Indian identity but contradictorily also at odds with Indian identity when linked with queer culture.

Her friends, meanwhile, meander out of the parlour and mention that next week is 'Cultural Diversity Week' at university and that the Indian Student Union is organizing an event. In contrast to her mother, who has rigid notions about authenticity and identity, Anita's friends encourage participation in Indian cultural events as part of a critical multicultural appreciation of diversity. Anita is cynical about the aims of the Indian Student Union in its celebration of diversity, and says it is probably more like 'meet your mate' week. Mindy, her friend, says that the JSU (presumably the Jewish Student Union) is just like that too, implying that many college ethnic clubs are about meeting and marrying someone of the same ethnic background. Anita seems uninterested in that and is content with the camaraderie of her girlfriends. Meanwhile, her mother has cautioned Anita to get her nose pierced in 'the right place', meaning not only the right side of her nose, but also the venue in which she chooses to do it. She asks Anita to wait until she comes home so they can go to a 'special place' instead of getting it done by someone who doesn't 'know what it means'. Her mother implies that Indian culture is more authentic and at odds with American understandings of nose-piercing.

Anita and her friends leave the parlour in Greenwich Village, exclaiming 'this is definitely not the right place!' Perhaps inspired by her mother to find 'the right place', the friends wander into another place that bespeaks more of Indian traditions, in that a South Asian shopkeeper dressed in a sari runs it. She meets them while a Bollywood film song is playing in the shop. The song is 'Mere Ghar Aayee Ek Nanee Pari' and the opening line roughly translates in English as 'A young fairy has come

into my home on a beautiful moonlit chariot'. The significance of the director's choice of music is ironic in this case, since the woman greets the young women who enter her shop with suspicion while a welcoming refrain echoes in the song. The song probably reminds Ganatra of films like *Kabhi Kabhi*, which were popular with immigrant families in the 1980s, and suggests immigrant traditions of gathering together to watch films on video. These films often represent the greatest exposure that immigrant children ever have to hearing Hindi spoken. Anita finds she can communicate a little bit in Hindi, but not as well as she would like to, and ends up leaving the shop with a nose ring in her hand. Her friends try to communicate with the woman as well. When Dara, Anita's African-American friend, finds the shopkeeper staring at her nose ring (pierced on the right side of her nose), she explains, 'it's a dyke thing'. Anita and her friends stand outside the shop and Anita says, 'I couldn't do it... I couldn't even tell her I wanted a nose ring.' Her search for markers of cultural authenticity in Indian tradition fails perhaps because there is no 'authentic' culture to be found. There is so much diversity to the nose-piercing tradition in India that few are able to arrive at precise and historical meanings. Nose-piercing represents different things to different communities in India, so that no authentic culture may be spoken of. For hippie communities who traveled to India in the 1960s, punk communities in the 1970s and queer communities in the 1980s and 1990s, nose-piercing is a reaction against conservative values.

Following the scene in the Indian shop, we come to a very interesting part of the film that takes place on the street outside. Anita is suddenly awestruck by a group of South Asian men and women walking towards her dressed in both traditional Indian and western clothes. In the group, two men embrace each other as they walk. It is a very significant scene. Its dreamlike nature makes it unclear whether Anita has imagined this group or if they have actually walked past her. The *bhajan*, or religious song, 'Raghupati Raghava Raja Rama', plays in the background as they approach her. The reference in the *bhajan* to 'Eswar Allah tero Naam'—which may be translated as 'Eswar [Hindu word for God] and Allah are your names' or as 'Eswar and Allah are the same name'—in a song that is about devotion to the Hindu God-King Rama, suggests an understanding that Indian tradition has a history of diversity, pluralism and tolerance. From this scene Anita concludes that what is important is the sense of unity in difference, and she wants to go home with her friends. The scene functions as an epiphany of sorts, a realization that tradition and modernity coalesce in the group as an emblem of unity. As Anita turns around to look at them, they are gone, and the scene cuts to the Indian shopkeeper standing outside her shop, still gazing curiously at

the three friends. Meanwhile, Mindy and Dara discuss and joke about eating a fish sandwich in a way that resonates with jokes in queer cultures.

Junky Punky Girlz is primarily a film about a young Indian American woman who is getting her nose pierced with lesbian friends who refer to nose-piercing as a 'dyke thing'. At the moment of Anita's cultural confusion about the place where she should have her nose pierced, whether in an alternative Greenwich Village parlour or an Indian-run shop, a song or *bhajan* called 'Raghupati Raghava Raja Rama' is playing in the background on the film's soundtrack. The *bhajan* is meant to praise the Hindu God-King Rama of the *Ramayana*. But, interestingly, it also praises Allah. This *bhajan* was supposedly Mahatma Gandhi's favourite, since it called for communal harmony.²² The *bhajan* functions in the film as an agent of decisiveness whereby Anita decides how, where and why to have her nose pierced. The *bhajan*, her mother's voice on the phone and her affiliation with her lesbian friends are all catalysts for her understanding that Indian religious traditions are not antithetical to queer affiliation, since both result from movements opposed to patriarchy and caste/class hierarchies.

The *bhajan* plays as a backdrop of the film, and the group walking past Anita has an ethereal quality. The *bhajan* signifies a lack of, and longing and nostalgia for, traditions. This nostalgia is often found in contemporary South Asian American youth formations, as described by Sunaina Maira earlier in this article. But instead of being lost in nostalgic reflection, Anita, in a moment of epiphany, decisively reconciles what she may have formerly seen in tension. That is to say, being 'Indian' and being queer are not held in tension, but are seen as compatible formations.

The scene of the crowd walking past Anita cuts to a bookshelf on which books like *Sisterhood Is Global* coexist with statues of Indian mythological gods. As they light incense, Anita's friends pierce her nose. Then they all run to the bathroom mirror to see how it has turned out. Her nose is pierced on the left side as her mother suggested. Interestingly, the phone rings, and the answering machine plays the voice of Anita's mother leaving a message and giving her approval for the nose-piercing. As they listen, they begin to smile and sing 'Happy Birthday'. Not knowing if it is actually anyone's birthday, we assume the song is about rebirth and reinvention. Anita has reinvented herself in the process of nose-piercing, but as what? Clearly, she chooses to do it in the 'right place', according to her own wishes. Anita's sexuality is important to the story but Ganatra purposely locates her within lesbian culture without identifying her as a lesbian. Whether or not Anita is negotiating her identity as a lesbian or a bisexual character who is also Indian is unclear,

and perhaps purposely not made the main action of the film. The film refuses a narrative of 'coming out' as a prevalent motif of queer culture. What is clear is that Anita is immersed in queer culture as an alternative to normative heterosexual forms of belonging in the university community. She chooses friendship and female companionship over markers of cultural 'authenticity', be they Indian or East Village trendiness. The nose-piercing as a fashion statement is also a political statement. It is a reinvention of tradition and of her selfhood. And that her female companions are the agents of change is significant. Both her friends have their noses pierced on the right side of their noses, and one of them has referred to it as a 'dyke thing', but Anita chooses to follow the tradition her mother has prescribed as 'Indian'. She follows it on her own terms, however, and with her own friends. Her friends as a queer of colour formation are a significant agent of change in Anita's thinking of herself as they provide a non-coercive space in which to negotiate her identity.

This begs the question of why use tradition at all if the purpose is to create a collective youth culture? In the context of *Junky Punky Girlz*, the answer is very clearly located in the need to bridge affiliations with friends and family. It becomes clear that Anita, even when with her friends, thinks back to her mother's voice on the phone, the photograph she carries from her mother, and to the question of which side of the nose is traditionally pierced. Reviving Indian tradition allows her to participate in both her old and new worlds. She is both in touch with her mother and her lesbian friends in a way that minimizes the cultural confusion of setting concepts against each other. It is as important to Anita to bond with her mother as it is to bond with her friends, and so same-sex attraction here is about more than sexual preference. It is a desire to affiliate strongly with other women based on both commonalities and differences. Thus, an understanding of same-sex attraction and its nuances in daily life is explicitly linked to an understanding that reconciles tradition and modernity in all of these works.

Notes

- 1 Shah discusses how the desire to find a common identity and history in the Indian subcontinent shapes the politics of South Asian queer organizations. But, he argues: 'Although identity emerges from an awareness of difference, articulating an identity can also serve to mask differences' (Shah 1998:151). His interest is in questioning what complexities and contradictions may be denied in claiming a global queer identity. I find this article very useful and informative, and it is my intention to see why particular historical texts lend

themselves to queer readings, and therefore are reflected in contemporary queer texts. I do so understanding fully that I may be looking to the past to invent in it the needs of today. In other words, I am not as interested in 'accurate' historical accounts of the *Ramayana* as I am in gleaning from this historical text what may be useful for contemporary audiences in forming a queer identity across differences.

- 2 Romila Thapar observed that the televised Indian version of the *Ramayana* possessed a dangerous and an unprecedented authority to fix meaning in ways that reflected the views of the middle class and not the concerns of vast numbers of Indians. She worried that the multiplicity of the *Ramayana* tradition would be lost (Thapar 1989). In her Introduction, to *Many Rāmāyanas*, Paula Richman writes: 'Not only do diverse Ramayanas exist; each Ramayana text reflects the social location and ideology of those who appropriate it' (Richman 1991:72). Thus, Richman's volume emerged as a scholarly book in response to the danger of occluding different versions of the *Ramayana* that circulate in South Asia. Valmiki's version of the *Ramayana* is the one most often studied by western scholars. A. K. Ramanujan's essay 'Three Hundred Rāmāyanas' argues that different tellings of the *Ramayana* should be viewed neither as individual stories nor as diversions from some 'real' version by Valmiki (Ramanujan 1991). Rather, tellings of the *Ramayana* should be seen as an expression of the rich set of resources existing in India and wherever Indian culture took root. The beliefs of particular religious communities, the literary conventions of regional cultures and specific sets of social relations may influence them.
- 3 For a foundational text of Ethnic Studies, see Omi and Winant 1994, which elaborates the authors' theory of racial formations as a counter-hegemonic set of beliefs and practices that challenges projects of what they call the 'racial state'. For interventions in the field of Asian American Studies that attempt to understand how Asian American racial formations contest hegemony, see Lowe 1996 and Prashad 2000. See Hong 2001, a recent analysis of Ethnic Studies, for an analysis of the specific emergent histories of Asian Studies, American Studies and Asian American Studies, and how to understand their links through capital and globalization.
- 4 Much of the good work on postcolonial studies has emerged from South Asia in the aftermath of independence struggles. See Sangari and Vaid 1990, which analyses the role of tradition in contemporary formations and calls for a 'feminist historiography'; understanding that all of history is gendered, the volume calls for a reconsideration of colonial history and postcolonial conditions through a feminist lens. For an understanding of diaspora, see George 1998; many of the essays in this volume examine racial formation in the United States alongside diasporic consciousness in other locales including South Asia. In particular, see Gopinath 1998a and Reddy 1998. See also Radhakrishnan 1996 for an analysis of the politics of diasporic writing. For Ethnic Studies, see footnote 3.
- 5 In 1995 Hindu fundamentalists backed by the BJP in India stormed the Babri Masjid because they believed it was the original birthplace of Lord Ram.

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- Their wish to erect a Hindu temple there took a violent turn and demonstrated disrespect for minority religious sentiments in India.
- 6 On 12 August 1993 the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) destroyed a Buddhist exhibition representing a depiction of the *Ramayana* in which Buddha is reborn as Rama. Later, members of the BJP filed criminal charges against the exhibitors because the exhibit depicted Rama and Sita as brother and sister.
 - 7 Valmiki's *Ramayana* is the most widely read version in the West, and therefore many scholars assume that the *Ramayana* tradition should be understood with this as the authoritative text alongside 'others'. The *Many Rāmāyanas* approach contests this understanding of the *Ramayana* by seeing every version as a telling rather than as a variant, since variant implies a divergence from the 'real'.
 - 8 Richman acknowledges that authoritative tellings of the *Ramayana* do exist in contrast to oppositional tellings. Authoritative tellings usually stress a link with normative ideologies as they affirm the values of an existing order. Nevertheless, even with authoritative tellings, there is a tradition of questioning and contestation that occurs. In contrast to authoritative tellings, which are popularized by elites, oppositional tellings hold sway in regional communities. In Karnataka, both Jain and Hindu tellings of the *Ramayana* exist side by side. In addition, oppositional tellings are influenced by class location so that upper-class women usually sing of Rama and perform different songs than lower-caste women. See Nilsson 2000.
 - 9 Kishwar compares the Tulsidas *Ramayana* to Valmiki's *Ramayana* and argues that the Tulsidas text depicts Ram as banishing the shadow of Sita while keeping the real Sita at his side. This, she claims, undermines critiques of Rama and the painful rejection Sita experiences in Valmiki's version.
 - 10 John Kelly notes that, apart from Gandhi's references to Ramaraj and the devotional logic of *satyagraha* (Gandhi's invocation is very different from Hindu fundamentalist invocations of Ramaraj), Indian elites did not look to the epic past to constitute the future of independent India. In Fiji, however, the *Ramayana* played a critical role in the politics of indenture (Kelly 2000).
 - 11 Southall Black Sisters is a feminist group based in the predominantly South Asian (Punjabi) community of West London. Pragna Patel described it as a space in which she could put theoretical understandings of race, class, gender and socialism into practice. She explained, however, that this type of work became more of a challenge as politicized religious identities replaced the more secular identities around which anti-racist work was originally based (Connolly and Patel 1997). Women against Fundamentalism, another group that Patel writes about, is a feminist organization set up by women active in the South Asian, Jewish, Irish and Iranian communities. The group opposes all fundamentalisms, not just those in minority religious communities in Britain. One of its stated goals is to make visible the links between Christianity and the state in Britain.
 - 12 Kelly does not hold up the *Ramayana* as a scriptural text but mentions that government sources in Fiji do perceive the *Ramayana* as scripture for Hindus just as the Qur'an is for Muslims.

- 13 Both Ferguson and Reddy are interested in queer of colour critique as a materialist approach. Ferguson elaborates very clearly in his Introduction to *Aberrations in Black* both the need for and dis-identification with Marxist critique. In the space of this article, I do not provide a discussion of the texts in question through a materialist lens, but I proceed from an understanding that queer of colour analysis is embedded in understanding social formations and that ‘nonheteronormative racial formations represent the historical accumulation of contradictions around race, gender, sexuality and class’ (Ferguson 2004:17). Social formations arise out of material contradictions, and this is a productive site for further examination of these and other texts.
- 14 Many experts on assimilation acknowledge its history as an Anglocentric approach. See Brubaker 2001; although I disagree with Brubaker’s desire to redefine assimilation as a non-coercive process intended for immigrant betterment, his article is nevertheless useful.
- 15 Lisa Lowe elaborates this concept of gendered forms of citizenship for the study of narrative texts in *Immigrant Acts*. She writes: ‘Racialization along the axis of definitions of citizenship has also ascribed “gender” to the Asian American subject. Up until 1870, American citizenship was granted exclusively to white male persons; in 1870, men of African descent could be naturalized, but the bar to citizenship remained for Asian men until the repeal acts of 1943–52. Whereas the “masculinity” of the citizen was inseparable from his “whiteness,” as the state extended citizenship to non-white persons, it formally designated these subjects as “male” as well’ (Lowe 1996:11). Evelyn Nakano Glenn discusses how race and gender shaped American citizenship and labour in *Unequal Freedom* (Glenn 2004). David Eng discusses the psychic effects of racialization and citizenship for Asian American masculinity and desire in *Racial Castration* (Eng 2001).
- 16 The women’s wing of the Shiv Sena also participated in the riots.
- 17 A ‘lesbian critique’ by V. S. of the Campaign for Lesbian Rights, in ‘The Controversy over *Fire*: A Select Dossier (Part 2)’, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 1/3, 2000, p. 519.
- 18 Quoted in ‘Activists slam attacks on lesbian film, Hindus vow to widen protest’, *Agence France Presse*, 3 December 1998, available on SAWNET at www.sawnet.org/news/fire.html#2 (viewed 3 May 2006).
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 *Karva Chauth* is a Hindu ritual in which women fast until moonrise for the long life of their husbands. In the film *Fire*, women perform the rituals for each other, displaying the homosocial and homoerotic aspects of the ritual.
- 21 For pro-assimilation groups, the wearing of turbans (for Sikhs) and headscarves (for Muslims) is often cast as traditional and antithetical to American ways within systems of education. Recent debates in France over headscarves and religious gear are a further case in point. Scholarship should increasingly focus on trying to understand what these traditions signify in immigrant contexts rather than legitimating them as ‘authentic’ cultural markers.
- 22 Experts like John Stratton Hawley believe that from its melody the *bhajan* is probably a twentieth-century song. It is not attributed to any of the Bhakti

saints and it is unlikely to come from the Bhakti period. In displaying Hindu/Muslim harmony, however, it is reminiscent of the Bhakti movement. Allah represented in a *bhajan* that praises Rama aligns the religious teachings of Hinduism and Islam, which were most unified during the Bhakti movement (from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century). This was the point at which the two religions we now call Hinduism and Islam were the closest and also the moment when many *bhajans* originated, as Bhakti and Sufi traditions aligned. The Bhakti movement is tremendously important for understanding the use of the *bhajan* in the film. It started as a reaction and rebellion against organized religion with its temple/priest hegemony. The alternative practices of singing and sharing feelings of unmediated devotion among followers were ultimately incorporated into the temple system. Therefore, *bhajans*, like this one, represent progressive traditional hymns. In writing about the Bhakti saints, Hawley suggests that they had both a conservative and progressive side. Of Tulsidas, one such Bhakta who sang praises of Ram in a reformist spirit, Hawley writes: ‘And though his candidacy for moral leadership had much to do with his conservative ecumenicity within the Hindu spectrum, as time passed, his progressive bhakti side also received its play’ (Hawley 1998:158).

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