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Atrangik Narivad: New Directions for Queer Feminist Studies in India

Srila Roy, *Changing the Subject: Feminist and Queer Politics in Neoliberal India*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022. 183 pp., notes, references, index.

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Abstract: This essay places Srila Roy's recently published *Changing the Subject* in dialogue with my book, *Worlding Postcolonial Sexualities* studying Southern feminist and queer activism to reveal solidarities and dissensions that contribute to new forms of world-making. My focus is on the first section of *Changing the Subject* where Roy describes her research with Sappho for Equality (SFE) to map a queer feminism—that I describe as *atrangik narivad* in Hindi—characterized by three specific shifts: from physical (community center, organization offices, homes) to virtual spaces; from lesbian to trans concerns; and from activism to consumption. The essay concludes with some observations and queries about feminist queer pedagogy in connection with Roy's students in South Africa and mine in North America and India.

Keywords: feminist, India, pedagogy, postcolonial, queer

Responding to Srila Roy's recently published *Changing the Subject* is to revisit the long years of conversations and research that went into my own book, *Worlding Postcolonial Sexualities*, on feminist and queer activism in India, Jamaica, and South Africa from the 1970s to the 1990s (Batra 2021). Like Roy, though from a different disciplinary perspective, I relied on recollections of these decades, personal contacts, interviews, interactions with feminist and queer organizations, and the newspapers, newsletters, magazines, and reports produced by these organizations. As in *Changing the Subject*, the central premise of *Worlding Postcolonial Sexualities* is that studying Southern feminist and queer activism reveals solidarities and dissensions that contribute to new forms of world-making.

In this essay, I focus on the first section of *Changing the Subject* where Roy describes her research with Sappho for Equality (SFE) to map a queer feminism—*atrangik narivad* in Hindi—characterized by three specific shifts: from physical (community center, organization offices, homes) to virtual spaces; from lesbian to trans concerns; and from activism to consumption.

The two Calcutta-based organizations Roy focuses on—Sappho for Equality and the eponymous, Janam—operated as NGOs, even if they sometimes did not use the term to describe themselves. Coincidentally, one of my early affiliations in the 1990s and early 2000s was with a theatre group called Jan Natya Manch or Janam for short. Led by Molyashree Hashmi after the brutal murder of the group's founder Safdar Hashmi, their performances were conceptualized in dialogue with emerging concerns in the Indian Women's Movement (IWM). That was almost twenty years ago. The terrain of feminist politics in India changed dramatically following the 1998 *Fire* controversy when Hindu fundamentalists attempted to stop screenings of the film on the grounds that its depiction of a lesbian relationship between women violated Indian cultural and religious norms. Before, and certainly after that year, lesbian feminist networks existed in uneasy collaborations with feminist groups.

An important thread in Roy's book is uneasy feminist governmental and non-governmental collaborations, fractious but essential, simultaneously partaking of and resisting the capitalist, technological, philanthropic, and consumerist affordances of neoliberalism. Describing the workings of the organizations she studies as “entanglements” rather than “cooptation,” she outlines how the dictates of funding and

NGOization transformed the contours of the IWM by the early 2000s (Roy 2022, 167). The stage for this shift was set at the UN Conferences on Women where, at least from the early 1980s, there was a special NGO forum, a transnational venue where feminists would meet and collaborate. This is where lasting Global South transnational alliances led to organizations including the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA), and Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN), among others.

Uneven processes of globalization mean that activist spaces are simultaneously local, national, and transnational, with varying power differentials. The spaces Roy mentions in her account of the Calcutta - based support group Sappho, later SFE, include early meetings in an apartment housing the organization, coffee shops, a “reception” area in another home – all indicate blurring of private-public settings. This is characteristic of sexuality work and the research involved in understanding this work. My first such contact with the Delhi-based lesbian organization Sangini, which shared space and personnel with Naz India, was in a plush second floor apartment in South Delhi in the late 1990s. Every week a few (middle- and upper-class) women met to talk about sexuality over tea and biscuits. Some identified as lesbian, others did not, some were celibate by choice and others talked about plans to transition so that they could live with their partners without social disapproval. The nature of these meetings changed in the early 2000s with shifts in activism and internet connectivity in India for a certain class, though having left Delhi by then, I was unable to witness and participate in the shift.

Roy’s book assiduously charts such shifts. Digital ubiquity and the widespread use of social media meant the closure of the SFE support group leading to new, sometimes disembodied forms of activism and outreach. Niharika Banerjee, SFE member, academic, and activist, mentions how the digital affords “rich tapestries of identity formation, narration of selves, dialogues across differences that allows activism to continue as an ongoing practice beyond face-to-face interactions. Activism, after all, is not a finished product that begins and ends with a face-to-face meeting, but continues online, which often provides a space to rest, recover and renew” (2018, 30). Roy’s account indicates, first, a bifurcation of social and activist needs as Sappho continued as an “informal space for interactions” while SFE is the “forum for activism” open to all members “irrespective of gender or orientation” (2022, 56), and second, the continuation of activism as “ongoing practice” in virtual spaces.

In 2016 Roy learned that the support group had ceased to exist and that, in contrast to a previous generation, young queer women were aware of and comfortable with their sexualities even before contacting SFE. These means of communication and connection—listservs, websites, blogs, closed Facebook groups, Twitter feeds, Reddit forums—that I call “DigiFemQueer,” continued important conversations initially taking place in physical spaces from where organizations such as Sappho and Sangini began their work. While an important extension and means of connection, especially in Covid times, these digital spaces reflect the push and pull of social and activist desires. Just as a younger generation joins organizations like Sappho to seek people like themselves for companionship and love, to be part of an activist network, or both, rather than a safe space free of violence and discrimination, the organizations themselves shift in their focus areas, outreach, and modes of action and communication.

The turn to what a recent anthology calls the “neoliberal-digital” is evident when Roy analyzes the digital as a space for socialization *and* activism, gratuitous self-presentation, *and* public visibility; name calling *and* well-thought-out positions; and the class, caste, and education of those adept in this modality (Dasgupta and DasGupta 2018, 1-26). Because social media often facilitates and leads to in-person interactions there is a thin line between online and onsite self-presentation even as we are aware of differences between organizational and individual persona and persons. This analysis raises important questions about methods in studies of sexual activism now that the digital is in some senses a ubiquitous mode of socialization and activist information (though not necessarily the primary mode of outreach). How does online self-presentation change the way we view our respondents and contacts, and in turn, how they view us as researchers? In what ways do such interactions impact our study of organizations or collectives as the sum of virtual and in-person contacts? And finally, to what extent should studies of sexuality include awareness of these considerations?

The book recounts stories of SFE members Joy (transman, middle class), Sushmita (lesbian, lower caste), and Durba (Marxist, queer, upper caste) to indicate varying modes of familial relations and activist connections. Assuming they are all adept at using social media and have an online presence, should we give

equal emphasis to their presentation of self and activist relations online? Writing of “limited intersectionality,” Roy mentions, “while being openly queer, individuals are still in the closet—hiding some parts of the self while performing the labor of being middle-class, upper-caste, global, aspirational Indians” (2022, 94). Today, the virtual is one of the primary locations of affect. What aspects of themselves do these subjects reveal virtually, what affects are generated by these revelations, and does this change the researcher’s understanding of their political and personal lives?

In terms of physical self-presentation, Roy describes income-differentiated consumerist self-presentation in sartorial choices of the LGBTQ+ community in Calcutta, especially one interviewee who mentions “If I want to use the term *gender-queer-heteronormative*, then I have to do it in cotton” (2022, 93). Apparel choices in liberalized India, where ethnic chic via Khadi and Fabindia clothing co-exists with chain stores like Big Bazaar and Shoppers Stop, are an apparent marker of class differences. The thread runs through Roy’s discussion of the microfinance and women’s rights organization Janam where she portrays rural women’s journeys from saris to slacks, shades, and smartphones as postfeminist neoliberal subjectification (2022, 138). Though this subjectification marks a generational shift in clothes, hairstyles, and appearance, it also registers and references queerness in popular culture, as pointed out in Roy’s reading of the lesbian couple in the clothing label Anouk’s advertisement.

My next observation is to do with responses to studies like Roy’s and mine. As a middle class, city-based teacher and scholar of Southern urban centered feminist and queer movements, I share with Roy the postcolonial hauntings of rural subaltern subjectivities, which she describes in her conclusion through the figure of the *graamer meye* (the subaltern lesbian of rural Bengal) who elude our studies. With the author I can only “imagine what a story of queer feminisms in India would look like with the complex desires of the *graamer meye* at its center and in which metropolitan activists and their fantasies would figure as *other*” (2022, 164). There have been some attempts to narrate subaltern lesbian life-stories in English, as in Maya Sharma’s careful attention to non-metropolitan Muslim, *dalit* and *adivasi* lesbian subjectivities in *Loving Women* (2006). More recently, a spate of Bollywood films set in unspecified locations (*Geeli Pucchi*, 2022) or identifiable small towns and cities in Uttarakhand (*Badhaai Do*, 2022), Gujarat (*Maja Ma*, 2022), and Panjab (*Ek Ladki ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*, 2019) shift the previous focus on lesbian identities in Delhi, Bombay, and Calcutta and in the diaspora. The subaltern rural lesbian remains elusive even in these wonderful representations.

I conclude this essay with a query about feminist queer pedagogy in connection with Roy’s students in South Africa and mine in North America and, less frequently, in India. My American students are receptive to and aware of differences between rural and urban sexual identities, especially if they are from the tri-state area of Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico which do not boast the queer subcultures of cities elsewhere in the United States. They are often startled to learn of the “early origins of lesbian activism in gay male spaces” as described in the book via Sappho who initially used the gay male group Counsel Club’s mailbox number to communicate with lesbians who wrote to them (50) and as described in my book via the Bombay and Johannesburg based gay male publications, *Bombay Dost*, *Link/Skakeel*, and *Exit*. At the same time, they are somewhat confused by the intricacies of transnational feminist and queer analysis which parse out the class, caste, and locational specificities of queer feminism.

In India, my discussions of queer feminism in non-metropolitan classrooms in Roorkee, Dhanbad, and Jammu yielded two responses. The first, easier to understand, is of incredulity among a student body that feminist and queer can be related in the ways Roy and I describe because feminism or *narivad* is for many the theory of and response to female oppression and “*atrangik narivad*,” a queer feminism that foregrounds connections, relationality and pleasure between women does not really fit this understanding. The second response, by a section of urban gay and trans male queer activists, is dismissal of all sexual activism (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender) as co-opted by the NGO nexus. These responses too are mediated by the urban versus non-urban divides that we mention in our work.

Examining our participant observation methods to include digital presences of our subjects, the contours of which are already present in Roy’s analysis, and responses to our transnational queer feminist pedagogy in various contexts are two of the many new directions opened by the incisive analyses offered in *Changing the Subject*.

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