

Indian English Women's Narratives from the 1950S to 1999: a Parallel Confrontation of Political Stories and Controversial her Stories

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Abstract

In this article I attempt to establish a parallelism between some gender issues that emerge in modern post independence Indian society and their reflection in Indian English literature written by women writers. Guided by an accurate selection of works, in their great majority novels by Indian women writers in English, I aim to search out a parallel confrontation between the questions raised in the fictional narratives and the struggle of women at each particular *her* *historical* period: the Nehruvian time, the 70s-80s, the 90s and the globalized era. On the other hand I would also like to demonstrate that some of the fiction written by Indian female writers, and the issues discussed, transgress social and cultural patterns upheld by the hegemonic patriarchal power. As a result it will confirm how some of these Indian English narratives written by women writers have anticipated life.

Keywords: Indian English narratives by women; Indian *her* *story*; gender issues; from1950-1999.

It is well-known that the works by Plato and Aristotle have mostly influenced the world of theory and criticism. Their most influential contribution was to conceive literature as a didactic and mimetic expression, that is to say, an imitation or representation of life. Today, in more recent times, and to be more precise since the emergence of Post structuralism during the 1960s and 1970s, the deconstructive view of literature conceives the theory of the social text. In this way, as the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001) illustrates, literature can be mimetic, expressive, didactic but at the same time "the knowledge it conveys is of the 'cultural unconscious', that is, of the archive of historical words, symbols, codes, instincts, wishes, and conflicts characteristic of a people and its era" (Leitch, et alt, 2001, p. 6). When the scenario is Indian English writing by female voices, who have been marginalized and trivialized by the dominant patriarchal establishment, one can question whether the relationship between their literary productions and the plight of women at every single episode of their making *herstory* is a faithfully mimetic expression of reality or, whether the literary art goes beyond all kind of cultural constrictions and barriers.

In this article then I attempt to establish a parallelism between some gender issues that emerge in modern post independence Indian society and their reflection in Indian English literature written by women writers. Guided by an accurate selection of works, in their great majority novels by Indian women writers in English, I aim to search out a parallel confrontation between the questions raised in the fictional narratives at each particular *her* *historical* period: the Nehruvian time, the 70s-80s, the 90s and the globalized era.

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On the other hand I would also like to demonstrate that some of the fiction written by Indian female writers, and the *herstorical* issues discussed, transgress social and cultural patterns upheld by the hegemonic patriarchal power. As a result it confirms what Jeanette Winterson states in *Art Objects* (1996) that: "Art does not imitate, art anticipates life" (p. 40).

The panoramic sample of the different images of women in India that I draw on contribute to highlighting diversity as well as deconstructing those patriarchal and colonial gender parameters that have shaped women into a strictly conventional mould. Although my selection of female images is mainly limited to the contemporary Indian novel in English, it does not constitute an isolated fact for drawing conclusions.

Throughout the history of India there have always been common images of Indian women in the different literatures of the country, as the editors of *The Image of Woman in Indian Literature* (1993), Yashoda Bhat and Yamuna Raja Rao, state: "in every age woman has been seen primarily as mother, wife, mistress, and sex object –their roles in relationship to men--. Roles outside this, i.e. woman as an achiever, as a leader, or as a strong individual are, by and large, either non-existent or rare" (p. ix). Further on Bhat and Rao argue that after Independence, when social activism by women started to offer its results and education prepared women to fight feudal values and conventions, the new Indian woman with her multiple roles and images emerged in literature as a depiction of real life.

In some of the novels by the "great fathers" of Indian English literature –as they have been defined-, writers such as Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan, there are women issues discussed, but the female characters typically take a second place in front of the male protagonists. In *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) Raja Rao exalts the woman figure and the feminine principle but the author's persona and his transcendental experience with the feminine absolute always lead the rhythm of the narration. In *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) R. K. Narayan depicts the Gandhian context and the struggle for independence where women like Bharati represent the female masses fighting for independence. "By the late 1920s Gandhi had changed his tune to calls for women to come out of their homes and join in the civil disobedience movement" writes Radha Kumar in *The History of Doing* (2004, p. 83). And a few lines below she stresses: "thousands of women all over the country were involved in the Quit India movement, going underground, helping form parallel governments, leading 'illegal' activities in the course of which several women were killed" (p. 93). These historical events are present in Narayan's novel, *Waiting for the Mahatma*. However, the story emphasizes the love relationship between Sriram and Bharati and focuses, with relevance and subtlety, on the fictional character of Mahatma Gandhi and his entire philosophy rather than on women's endeavour to free India from the clutches of colonialism.

Position certainly determines point of view and male writers' position in Indian English novels differs considerably from those narratives and voices written by women.

It is not until the 1950s when the first women writers, the first Indian explorers in the literary quest, started to compose narratives in English and to devise them from a different angle. Who narrates, what, and from which perspective and position mattered at the time, and still matters now. As a result women writers' fictions focus on the Indian woman of all classes, castes and positions. As far as history is concerned we have to remark here that Gandhi's intervention in the anti-colonial struggle had mobilized popular classes, and among them, *great numbers of women participated in the national movement*. It is also worthwhile mentioning that despite these mobilizations, Gandhi did not succeed in creating a programme for the economic empowerment of women and the material improvement of their condition. And although women were drawn into politics and came out into the public sphere, they were still defined by their roles within the family; those of mothers and wives (Kumar, 2004).

During the first years of Nehru's democracy, there are legal reforms that benefit women. The Indian Constitution declared equal rights for men and women, for example, in public employment. The Hindu Code rewrote several laws concerning marriage, divorce, adoption and inheritance. These constitutional rights were politically enacted but economic and social change required more time and a greater struggle. The majority of the women of this time were far from enjoying the legal rights and opportunities that the Constitution guarantees (Forbes, 1999). The literature by Indian women writers of the 50s reflects this social panorama, which is characterized by marriage being the focus of attention. In *Indian English Women's Fiction* (2007) Murali Manohar argues that marriage becomes the major pursuit of female characters in this period of the 1950s, whereas education is a factor that differentiates women. In general the female protagonists of these novels are not educated and their lack of education, in fiction or in real life, is the cause that impedes women's exercise of their rights. In some rare situations they are taught to read by some member of the family as is the case of Rukmani, the main character in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1955). The fiction of the 50s does offer a fair depiction of the representation of women in society but it does not deal with other roles that women can develop, for example, having a professional life. Nor is the theme of divorce addressed in these narratives. The first case of divorce is found in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* published in 1963.

If we move forward to the 1960s and examine the narratives of this time the main profession for women is still that of 'mother' and 'wife'. Divorce is considered an extraordinary event, only appropriate for educated women. The causes leading to divorce tend to be the following: an extramarital affair on the husband's part, physical maltreatment, disparity of ages, or the wife's humiliation for being forced into sexual relations with the husband's manager. The latter example occurs in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Amu, one of the female protagonists, asks for the legal dissolution of her marriage owing to the fact that her husband, a drunkard, accepts willingly that his boss can 'take care of his wife', while he recovers from his bad habit of drinking. Although the novel was published in 1997, and won the Booker Prize that year, the context in which Amu's story takes place corresponds to the first decades of post-independence times.

In the 1970s the historical events and achievements of women's movements around India marked a decisive shift that is portrayed in the literature of this period. The images of women that the narratives depict underline the rebellious spirit of the female heroines to resist convention and fixed roles of gender. These female protagonists rebel against arranged marriage and interrogate their compulsory role to become mothers. Many of these heroines stand out for their personal quest to have 'a room of their own', that is to say, a space for their individuality and the possibility of deciding and opting for a professional career. In a parallel confrontation with their making *herstory* we discover that: As women's militancy developed in the movement, gender-based issues began to be raised by them, following a pattern we have seen earlier and will see again and again: where a community expresses consciousness of its own oppression as a community through a protest movement in which women are acknowledged to be active; at a certain stage women apply this consciousness to questions of their oppression as a sex (Kumar, 2004 p. 100).

Further on Radha Kumar in *The History of Doing* (2004) argues that the 70s and 80s are crucial in organized network by women to protest against violence in the family, making it a public issue. The Shahada movement, for example, expressed their anti-patriarchal feelings; the aims of SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) were to improve the conditions of women at work and inculcate the ideals of honesty and dignity; women had also realized that holy books written by men, with their particular conceptions of purity and impurity, enslaved women and deprived them of education and independence. Moreover, it is also in the 1970s when, throughout the country, massive groups of ordinary women demonstrate against the brutal assault on their bodies, that is to say, rape; and also against dowry, which functions as a pretext for wife-battering.

These massive agitations of women, fighting harassment and gender oppression have their mimetic manifestation in the literary field. Women writers continued raising their voices against this situation. From the innumerable examples that literature narrates I would like to point out two that seem to me revealing and paradoxical. The first corresponds to the novel *Inside the Haveli* by Rama Mehta (1977) that tells the story of the lives of women in a haveli, observing purdah, and how some of them experience a transformation after the arrival of Geeta, the protagonist. Geeta is an educated and lively woman from Bombay who marries into a conservative family and abruptly finds her living in purdah in her husband's haveli. Geeta struggles to maintain her independence and progressive values and she eventually succeeds in changing the lives of the women there by teaching them to read:

News of the classes spread like monsoon floods and the young maids from the havelis came and joined the children. At first they just listened to the stories; they did not dare to take a pencil in their hands for they were afraid the children would laugh at them. But gradually they started to print the letters and to their surprise found the alphabets were after all not so difficult to learn. Soon the maids began to recognize words, the meaning of which they understood. Their success made them impatient to learn more and they urged Geeta to go faster. (p. 160).

The second novel I would like to comment is *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) by Anita Desai, a writer who has always excelled in the examination of women's psychology. One of her characters in this novel is Ila Das, a single woman who has rejected marriage and opted for a professional life, having different jobs, until she becomes a social worker. Ila defies the patriarchal system with its masculine power. Her courage and energy are dedicated to helping the poor women in the village, restructuring their lives and creating in them a new consciousness that repels injustice. Ila's example demonstrates that in a patriarchal society *an educated woman* has more possibilities to defend herself and survive than one who is not: 'Oh, I *do* feel ashamed of myself,' shrieked Ila Das. 'Ooh, I do, when I think how much better off I am than the poor, poor people around me. Why, you wouldn't believe the things I see, Nanda. It isn't just that I have this little bit of security, this tiny bit of status-' she gave a shout of laughter at herself- 'you know, as a welfare officer employed by the Government, while they simply starve if their cow dries up or the weevils destroy their potato crop [...] ooh, Nanda, 'her voice plunged down, down into the deepest gloom, 'why then, I *do* see the worth of our kind of upbringing after all (p. 128). The unexpected death of Ila or, we should say, her murder at the end of the novel shocks the reader. Anita Desai employs her literary resources to emphasize the work of women like Ila who rebel against tradition in real life and how, in order to defend women's own rights, some of them, unfortunately, have to pay a high price.

Shashi Deshpande is another extremely talented story teller of the late 70s, although her major novels, such as *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980) and *If I Die Today* (1982), among many others, appeared in the 80s. Her female characters reflect the air of rebelliousness of this *herstorical* period, as well as women's emotions and anxieties in a world that offers no easy solutions to their dilemmas. We have to bear in mind that at this time of *herstory*, Indian feminist movements and women's organizations spread throughout the country, acquiring more power and representing Indian women of different social status and interests. It is obvious, then, that women's own making of their *herstory* and their art / literary production go hand in hand, confidently, to fight a common enemy.

An overview of the literature of the 80s displays a myriad of forms to represent women and women's lives. There are examples where they decide to remain single; others, instead, get involved in a love relationship; some are determined to make their professional life their first target and consequently become teachers, writers, doctors or civil servants. Some women get divorced and some are abandoned by their husbands or are the victims of violence and maltreatment. The literature of this period envisions a world of women aware of the situation around them, where each individual woman takes her own decisions without being subjected to dependence on men.

The patriarchal socio-economic structures and institutions are hurdles on their way to success, but they, like the invincible Goddess Durga, push them aside, sometimes out of rage and desperation, some other times in oppressive silence, still in some other moments with delicate compassion. Novels such as *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) by Shashi Deshpande, *Para: Dreams of Passion* (1984) by Namita Gokhale, *Rich Like Us* (1985) by Nayantara Sahgal and *Clear Light of Day* (1980) by Anita Desai, to mention just a few, exemplify these images of Indian women in different scenarios of Indian life.

In *Clear Light of Day*, one of the best novels by Desai, the reader witnesses the psychological evolution of female characters throughout their lives. One of the protagonists, Bim, has decided to remain single, partly as her own decision and partly as an obligation. Despite her family ties, she has successfully managed to teach History at a university college. She is proud of teaching her students to be independent.

In *Rich Like Us* (1985) Nayantara Sahgal, portrays with generous details the political atmosphere during the time of India's Emergency, from 1975 to 1977, characterized by the political crisis and the suppression of liberties. Sahgal is Indira Gandhi's cousin and Nehru's nephew, so she notably knows the historical events and state of affairs. Sonali, the female protagonist in the novel, who gives voice to the writer, seems to point out that, in fact, people's rights are part of the liberal discourse typical of the Western upper-middle class, who denies these same rights to those who do not exercise power (Hubel, 1998). Those women who have acquired a certain level of freedom and individuality come from the same social class as the equivalent men. What Sonali and Sahgal interrogate is that in this period of Emergency in India all civil rights of the new independent and democratic India, guaranteed to both men and women, are deprived of significance, as only those of the upper-middle class in power seem to capriciously benefit from them:

It did not need much imagination to sense the hate and fear inside the vans with iron-barred windows, like the ones used for collecting stray dogs for drowning, that now roamed the streets picking up citizens for vasectomy [...] We were all taking part in a thinly disguised masquerade, preparing the stage for family rule. And we were involved in a conspiracy of silence (1983, p. 27-29).

Sonali, the protagonist of *Rich like Us*, sceptically questions the world and independent India. Her image corresponds to that of an Indian woman who is critical of the political situation and rejects injustice. The 80s are difficult years as there is a rise in communal violence all over India, mainly Hindu-Muslim and Hindu-Sikh. The assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 was used by the Congress Party to manipulate her image, treat it as a communal issue, and turn her into a female symbol, a mother goddess murdered by her children. In the long or short run this helped to create segregation and rivalry among the different groups of women and communities. On the one hand Indian feminism had positively branched into a series of activities and was gaining more and more confidence to deal with unfamiliar matters. Also, feminist movements had spread and diversified, taking a great variety of forms and perspectives, which gave them greater awareness of their problems. On the other hand the mid-eighties and later the nineties stand out in this *herstorical* and literary analysis due to the influence that communalism produces within women's organizations, which will eventually end up dividing women into two major antagonistic sectors:

Simultaneously, counter-movements against feminist (or women's rights) ideas began to be initiated by sections of traditionalist society, which took the more normal course of using an anti-feminist discourse based on demands for religious or cultural autonomy. The rise of these counter-movements was partly related to the spread of feminism and the influence it was beginning to have on women's attitudes, especially the family (Kumar, 2004 p. 159).

The work of Indian feminists that had brought so many improvements in women's lives was now attacked and dispraised by a traditionalist sector, which also claimed to represent the desires of 'Indian' women. For this group the Personal Laws of each religious community also had to be considered. If in the past the category of "Indian woman" had contemplated caste, class, region and culture, now the counter-movements against women's rights imposed communal distinctions (Muslim, Christian, Hindu, etc.), and the application of their family laws and/or Personal Laws, which, all in all, constituted a backlash against women's betterment and progress.

This is the cultural context the writer Manju Kapur highlights in her novel, *A Married Woman*. Although it is published in 2002 the background reflects the social and political imbalance of this historical period characterized by communal violence and religious upheaval that reach the most violent manifestation with the attacks to the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992. The story of *A Married Woman* focuses on Astha, an educated, middle-class Delhi woman who follows conventions and gets married to a loving husband. She lives happily during the first years of her marriage but very soon she starts discovering the emotional gap she feels and the emptiness of her whole life. The narration reaches its climax when, accidentally, Astha meets another woman and both of them fall in love and have a beautiful relationship together. Astha then starts interrogating her feelings, her life, her identity and the system itself. What seemed impossible has happened to her, an average woman of the mainstream.

With this depiction of an ordinary Indian woman, falling in love with another woman, Manju Kapur seems to remark that women must have alternatives to choose. Having alternatives, choices, is the great message Indian women seem to display in the new India of the 90s that has recently opened its doors to a globalized world. Tradition, and family and Personal Laws must never compel women to follow certain roles or patterns of life that are approved by the status quo. Instead there are many other alternatives and opportunities, all of them equally valid and acceptable. Above all women must be free to decide if they want to marry or not, who they want to love and with whom they want to spend their life. With her novel Kapur is brave enough to transcend same-sex love barriers that will be one of the major issues of the literature of the 1990s.

Unsurprisingly it is now in the 90s when literature most fiercely stresses women's rejection of hegemonic power. Women have learnt from their grandmothers and mothers; they have assimilated different models of oppression and they are reluctant to repeat them again. *Herstorically* they have participated in national campaigns against rape and dowry of the 1970s and onwards. They have called on the government to implant changes in the law. They have created centres for women in several cities, which provide legal aid, counselling, health care and even employment in some of them. Despite their ideological divisions and disappointment with respect to ethnic and communal conflict that produce unsolved problems, their victories cannot be negated (Kumar, 2004 & Forbes, 1999).

In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) we have a very relevant example that mimetically depicts three generations of women, the grandmother, the mother and the daughter, whose lives parallel the three big stages in Indian *Herstory*: pre-independence, independence and post-independence. Representing the great majority of women of her time, Mammachi, the grandmother, suffers physical aggression and humiliation, perpetrated by her own husband. She accepts it all in silence because she thinks this is the way it has to be. While the country suffers the horrors of colonization, the reader also learns about the patriarchal conquest that takes control over a woman's body, mind and soul. Instead, after independence in 1947 the next generation witnesses this suffering and is more consciously prepared to fight back. Ammu, the female protagonist, is courageous enough to transgress social norms and enrich her spirit, by freely loving the person she is attached to. Notwithstanding, the economic, social and legal system during the first decades of independent India still maintains a colonialist infrastructure that demands a high price to those who violate cultural norms.

In Roy's novel this transgression reaches its highest climax when Ammu dies alone in a hotel room, after being humiliated and abandoned by her own family, who could not accept her divorce and her new love relationship with a man of an inferior caste. Rahel's generation symbolically stands for those women in contemporary India who have learnt to liberate themselves from rigid conventions, brushing off any trace of blame and shame that society imposes on them. Like in the *herstory* of many other Indian women, in this fictional narration Rahel, a woman fighter of contemporary times, challenges the powerful patriarchal institutions that oppress the underprivileged.

A new phase begins in India from the 1990s onwards with the emergence of a new literature by queer writers that focuses on alternative sexualities, and more precisely on same-sex love between women². The silent attitude towards sexuality that India had maintained for so long, owing to the discourses of colonialism, the influences of the Bible and the hegemonic ally heterosexual conception of sexuality that aims at procreation, are remarkably challenged in the last two decades of the 20th century, and more especially from the 90s onwards. Since then academic responses, popular voices and creative writers have questioned the role assigned to sexual desires within the socio-political and artistic fields (Garcia-Arroyo, 2010). Both writers and scholars have delved into the past in order to provide evidence of the Indian homoerotic richness to combat ubiquitous homophobia. This reinterpretation and writing of the homoerotic past of India is regarded not as an act of nostalgia but as a social cause and necessity of living. A characteristic that has to be pointed out is that queer writers tend to rely on personal experiences and thus writing becomes an act of artistic activism, in other words, art/literature is part of a common social political purpose. In a heteropatriarchal society like India one of the major problems that political movements and women writers have had to struggle against is lesbian invisibility. However, the 80s and 90s have resulted in fruitful changes and landmarks, some of which I would like to mention now.

Kamala Das is one of the pioneers who tackle the theme of same-sex love between women in "The Sandal Trees" (1988), also in her autobiographical narration, *My Story* (1977), and in some of her poetry. Despite the fact that Das is counted as a major 20th century Indian poet and is introduced as a "unique literary phenomenon in India" in critical works and anthologies (Mittapalli & Piciucco, 2001 p. v), not many critics have wanted to analyse her exploration of sexuality and her attitude to love owing to her controversial and bold literary style. Das has no qualms about depicting same-sex desire in works such as *My Story*, for which her defence of free love earned her the reputation of 'promiscuous'. In the short story "The Sandal Trees", Das describes the authenticity of love bonding and desire between Sheela and Kalyanikkutty, two women who fall in love when they are teenagers. Their strong attachment and affection does not expire when they are immediately married off but remains even more loving and passionate than before. Kamala Das wants to highlight that two women who fall in love are always subjected to rigid cultural conventions that contemplate heterosexuality as the only expression of sexuality.

We were bathing in the swimming-pond. In front of her gaze I suddenly felt shy. I felt my buttocks and my bosom trembling under her steady gaze (1995, p. 3). The moistness and taste of her mouth became mine. The roughness's and tenderness's of her body became all mine (p. 4). The writer delights, or perhaps surprises the reader, with beautiful literary descriptions of female sexual pleasure. Das always examines queer relations that occur within the heterosexual mainstream, among ordinary people in everyday situations. She seems to convey that it is within the heteropatriarchal system where these lesbian relationships take place.

² For a detailed account of alternative sexualities in India see my own book, *Alternative Sexualities in India* published by Books Way in Kolkata (2010).

In the context of the 80s and early 90s these relationships are still invisible and unacknowledged. Das subverts the domination of constructed attitudes and sexual taboos by naturally telling a same-sex love story and placing queerness within the hegemonic straight culture in India. In this way literature anticipates social reality. On the other hand, despite the recognition and internalization of the lover's love towards the beloved, Sheela, the one who is trapped within the marriage, does not express her feelings overtly, nor is she brave enough to liberate herself from the clutches of social convention.

The story was first published in 1988, which is a signal that indicates that it is very unlikely to find same-sex love stories with happy endings or fulfilling relationships, if writers want to be faithful to real life. If we have a quick glimpse at the *herstory* of women with alternative sexualities we realize that in the 80s there were reports in the Indian press about lesbian suicides, which were characterized by their sensationalist tone (Thadani 1996; Fernandez 2002). This inauspicious news was also complemented by reports on Indian lesbian marriages towards the late 80s (Anu & Giti 1993). In many of these cases the lovers followed ancestral traditions like the *gandharva* marriage, a non-contractual union, or the *Maitri Karar*, a friendship pact practised in the state of Gujarat through which the two women in love become *sahiyas* or lifelong companions. In 1988 when Kamala Das's "The Sandal Trees" was published, or even before, in *My Story*, when the writer depicts her own same-sex desires and attachments, the cultural context and situation for lesbians or *sahelis* was still very undefined.

Prior to Kamala Das's work there had been some artistic antecedents such as "The Quilt", a short story written originally in Urdu (*Lihaaʻ*) and published in 1942 by Ismat Chughtai. Also Suniti Namjoshi's poetry and fables deal with the theme of feminism and lesbianism. However, many of Namjoshi's works are first published abroad and reach India much later. Let me point out that one of the reasons for Namjoshi to leave the country is the discovery of her lesbianism and, as a result, the impossibility of living her life together with her lover in India.

In 1990 the first Asian Lesbian Conference takes place in Bangkok and is attended by seven lesbians from Delhi and Mumbai who meet other Asians to discuss issues related to politics, relationships, family, networking, arranged marriages, lesbian invisibility and the absence of artistic lesbian manifestations. A fruitful result of this conference is the formation of the Sakhi Collective, a Lesbian Resource Centre and Research and Networking Institute in Delhi. Afterwards many others have been appearing in urban areas, like Stree Sangam in Mumbai, to fight for legitimization and break their silence (Fernandez 2002). To debunk lesbian invisibility and misrepresentation, the lesbian movements of the 80s and 90s have resurrected homoerotic expressions of the rich Indian legacy and they have brought them to the popular memory. The re-appropriation of the terminology of love and desire has been crucial. If the term "lesbian" seems controversial for some women in India for its political load, the task has consisted in recuperating some terms in Sanskrit such as *saheli* or *sakhi*, and imbuing them with their original meaning, which alludes to the female lover and to love between women. Before this occurred, in 1986 the writer Suniti Namjoshi together with her female companion, the writer Gillian Hanscombe, expressed this idea of creating words and a language for women who love women in the poem "We can compose ourselves", published in *Flesh and Paper* (1986). Namjoshi's exile and lesbian experience in Canada in the 1970s teaches her that:

Where one is is a word. Who one is is a word. Indian, lesbian, poet, Hindu, donkey, monkey, dying animal. [...] And much of one's life is just a matter of exploring words to see which ones fit comfortably, and in which forest of words one might live and breathe" (2000 p. 83). She learns that her arrangement of words and combination of structures in the linguistic landscape can produce an alternative reality. Learning to control the natural elements, to defy wind, dust and cold, to discover how linguistic male rules function provides an escape to the infinite, an escape to a new land. The writer is determined to redesign the landscape, to transform history into literary *herstory*.

In 1999 the first literary anthology of lesbian writing in India appears in 1999, which undoubtedly constitutes a great achievement. Ashwini Sukthankar's edited volume, *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* is a landmark that represents a plural, visible and lesbian space in contemporary Indian writing in English.

Facing the Mirror (1999) is a remarkable collection whose outstanding characteristic is diversity. The writers who contribute to the anthology are all women who love other women. Of a total number of almost a hundred pieces of writing only a few contributors use their own real names. Most of them adopt a pseudonym, which is indeed a relevant indicator of ubiquitous homophobia. By using a pseudonym the writer can defend herself for it works as "a shield to deflect the light" and also as a "kind of ironic freedom" (p. xxvi). In *Talking Back* (1989) the USA writer, bell hooks, embodies this idea of opting for a pseudonym, a shelter, which for her, and also for the writers in *Facing the Mirror*, is a rebellious gesture, an act of empowerment to recreate and invent an identity, which affirms the right to speak and express one's alternative sexuality. The literary diversity of *Facing the Mirror* is reflected in the various genres that compose the text: essays, poetry, short stories and memoirs. Diversity is also present in the plurality of the thematic areas: some writers interrogate identity, others the space between two worlds, between the mask and the face, as the contributor 'V.S.' asserts, that is to say, the reality of being trapped in a conventional marriage and the desire of loving another woman. The great majority write about love, the theme par excellence which appears in all the works, adopting different forms: romantic, erotic, sexual. The editor, Sukthankar explains that the terms 'lesbian', 'writing' and 'Indian' have to be taken together: "to write with a knowledge of this country, and to relate to its particular freedoms and restrictions and proprieties from that perspective" (1999 p. xix).

A good example compiled in *Facing the Mirror* is the short story "The Letter" by Kanchana Natarajan as it mimetically reflects social reality in India in the last two decades of the 20th century. In this story Natarajan recalls the past and what being 'lesbian' and 'woman' mean in the context of a lower middle-class Brahmin family. It also foretells a hard but flourishing future for two women who love each other. There are striking words of the lover towards the female beloved which stir up great excitement: Listening to her was as exciting as biting into a green chilli, sliced and seasoned, in curd rice... with the thrill that comes from letting hot saliva flow freely into the mouth. Afflicted by the sting, swearing never to bite into a chilli again... but after a while craving it once more (p. 96)

In a more ironic mood the contributor, Julia, in "Meeting Myself", which is also a part of *Facing the Mirror*, starts her own story with an allusion to the damages of colonization:

Blame it on the Brits!

If you are one of those washed, cleaned, ironed and packed-in-stiff-brown-paper-packet Indians brought up in English-medium schools from the days of the Raj, you'll have learned by now that in addition to having introduced us to the wonders of their administrative abilities, their insatiable hunger to rule the world and to stay connected by rail, road, air, water, the Brits also robbed us of our robust, rustic nature and replaced it with the cold suppression of all emotion. Thus a passionate Indian, even fifty years after Independence, can never feel free to express the gushing warmth of the heart nor the tropical heat of the muladhar chakra, without feeling a little ashamed. Better still, reject it altogether! (p. 42).

No matter what name same-sex women and writers choose to define themselves (lesbians, *sahelis*, bisexuals etc) their mutual struggle towards acknowledgement of their rights and appropriation of a common and visible space marks a step towards the complete realization of a utopia³.

To conclude this article that has traced some parallelisms and mutual influences between *herstory* and fictional narratives in Indian English literature by women writers, I would like to draw on some of the intertwining relations. Like their counterparts round the world, women writers in India have never been satisfied with the 'official' representation of their reality as women. As subjects colonized by the politics of patriarchy and capitalism, (also read imperialism), Indian women writers and their fictional works have always shown a strong political-*herstorical* slant. Besides, their metaphorical narratives, their images and symbols act not only as agents of moral criticism but also as creators of new values that counterattack the hegemonic empire of patriarchy, and / or the destructive-masculinist system of imperialism. In this way, and as it has been demonstrated here, the literature by Indian English writers exposes 'how' real women live and have lived, but it also hints at, or anticipates, the idea of how women want to live, and how Indians should construct the national *Story* of their country.

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³ Let me remind the reader that in India, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, an old colonial law, is still applied today to criminalize homosexuality and homosexuals. The Section was decriminalized on 2nd July 2009 but that judgement was overturned by the Supreme Court of India on 12 December 2013. The legal battle towards Human Rights continues.

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