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Negotiating structural inequalities: Marriage, sexuality, and domesticity in Mridula Garg's *Chittacobra*

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Abstract

The patriarchal, virilocal, patrilineal structure of the family in India not only exploits class upper-caste/middle-class women's claims to equality within marriage but also renders their sexuality as particularly tied to the reproductive project of heterosexuality. Moreover, the institutionalization of marriage produces asymmetrical gendered relations to an extent that women are reduced to being men's property and possession, rigidly placed under their sexual ownership. This is mirrored and upheld by the institutional structures of the nation, especially the legislative and adjudicatory framework and how it approaches marriage, incidents of extra-marital affairs, divorce, legitimate progeny, and varied property laws. The latest example of this is the Government Ordinance rejecting the recommendations by the Justice J. S. Verma Committee to criminalize marital rape. Thus, the patriarchal biases inherent in the structures of the nation-state are not willing to reconsider marriage and women's negotiation of their sexuality out of the hegemonic framework that naturalizes consent. Through a reading of Mridula Garg's *Chittacobra*, this article focuses on the discourses around sexuality and intimacy within and outside the institution of marriage, highlighting how the gendered biases endorsed by the family–community–nation continuum negate other modes of identifying relationships and concerns of sexuality that may rest on mediation of lived experience and individual subjectivities. Although first published in 1979, the concerns raised by Garg in *Chittacobra* significantly illustrate how patriarchal institutions like marriage, even as late as the contemporary context, operate with categories like good and bad women, constantly rendering them fluid and temporal, offering an insight into and interrogating the concomitant structures of the violence inherent in this intimacy.

Keywords

gender relations, marriage, nation, sexuality, women

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The gendered contexts of post-independence India have continued to circumscribe the possibilities of reconfiguring the institution of marriage, which (re)produces heteronormative power differentials. This affects the possibilities of engaging with alternative sexual and emotional subjectivities within and without marriage. In fact, it is imperative to unravel the patriarchal underpinnings of such institutional structures that reduce women to being receptacles of the discontents of masculinity. Women must become, to use Rashmi Varma's term, "unhomely" (2012: 26), to not simply break such divisions but also renegotiate their claims to citizenship.

Reading Mridula Garg's *Chittacobra* (1979), this paper focuses on the larger debates and discourses around sexuality and intimacy within and outside the institution of marriage. It also explores how the gendered contexts of the nation-state have been determined by conservative juridico-patriarchal discourses, especially the institution of the Hindu Code Bill (1955–56). In fact, such discourses, along with institutional policy measures, discount women's productive labour within domesticity and the nation-state. This article not only interrogates such discourses but also engages with Garg's alternative conceptualizations of the gendered habitus in post-independence India. The novel proposes modes of defining relationships and forms of sexuality that rest on the mediation of lived experience and individual subjectivities, so pertinent to "constructing new modes of politics and identity in post-independence India" (Sreenivas, 2009: 128). Such a reading exercise becomes particularly relevant in contemporary times, when there is an urgent need to interrogate political apathy towards women's status and gender relations in the country. For instance, the government has failed to comply with some of the significant suggestions of the Justice Verma Committee (PRS Legislative Research, 2013) regarding legal measures to tackle violence against women. Thus, this article shows how literary narratives by Indian women insist on rewriting the manner in which gender relations have been conceptualized by the dominant institutions of the nation-state.

Mapping gendered contexts: Monogamous marriage and reproductive sexuality within the Hindu Code Bill

Mridula Garg was born in 1938 in New Delhi. Her upbringing was in many ways unconventional. Since her mother was an invalid, Garg learned early in life that a mother is not always supposed to be a nurturer and caregiver. Instead, she learned the art of reading from her mother, who was a voracious reader herself. Garg's training in literary reading and writing has enabled her to create unconventional characters and free-spirited women protagonists, and to confront the "tradition-bound Hindi literary establishment" (Jain and Dutt Paliwal, 2010: xxi). She is known as a non-conformist writer precisely for this reason. Some of her important works include (Garg 1990, 2001/ 1996, 2002/ 1975, 2011) *Daffodils Jal Rahein Hain* (*Daffodils on Fire*, 1990), *Uske Hisse Ki Dhoop* (*A Touch of Sun*, 1975), *Chittacobra* (*Chittacobra*, 1979), *Kathgulab* (*Country of Goodbyes*, 1996) and *Miljul Man* (2011). each of which explores issues of women's individuality, their need and desire for love, extra-marital alliances, marriage, reproductive rights, and the suspension of female guilt. Her works juxtapose the personal and the political, interlinking the personal experiences of women to the larger question of equitable distribution of resources and gender equality in society. *Chittacobra* deals with the

themes of love and sexuality on the one hand and marriage on the other. The protagonist Manu is married to Mahesh, but loves a Protestant missionary called Richard. Driven by ideas of philanthropy and charity, Richard wanders the world offering his services towards alleviating people's miseries. Manu meets him during one of his visits to India and falls in love with him. Though Richard stays in India only for eight months, Manu forms a special bond with him, and the novel primarily recounts Manu's experiences with Richard and how she negotiates his absence after he leaves India. It reads like a collection of reminiscences, representing Manu's perceptions of her life, choices, desires, anxieties, and relationships with Mahesh and Richard. In fact, the love for and absence of Richard in her life enables Manu to reflect on her solitude in an artistic manner that leads to her becoming a writer. Despite the fact that both Manu and Richard are married and have children with their respective partners, they do not experience guilt about their love relationship. Manu is not simply candid about her sexual desires, but engages with them at an intellectual level. By so doing, she problematizes the constructions of femininity, as well as the socio-cultural practices which regulate women's bodies within the limited context of marriage and child-bearing.

Driven by norms of caste purity and patrilineage, Hindu marriage not only represses women's sexuality but also denies them their individuality. Through Manu's extramarital relationship with Richard, she not simply interrogates such oppressive norms, but also becomes free to discern the terrors of domesticity. By exploring this, Garg's novel exposes the institutionalization of marriage, which thrives on the dissemination of asymmetrical gendered relations between men and women. In fact, it goes a step further and reveals how such an institutionalization of the marital relationship is geared towards protecting the homogenizing and patriarchal interests of the nation-state.

Here, it is important to consider the nation-state's motives in administering the Hindu Law reform in post-independence India. In 1948, India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru instituted a sub-committee of the Assembly, entrusting it with the task of drafting the Hindu Code Bill. The first Law Minister of India, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, was nominated as the head of this committee, and the Bill was submitted to the Assembly on 17 September 1951. It particularly sought to improve Hindu women's status in independent India by granting them the right to property and inheritance, marriage, divorce, adoption, and guardianship. As Sharmila Rege asserts in *Against the Madness of Manu* (2013):

> In summarising the provisions of the Bill to the Assembly, Ambedkar broaches unprecedented issues such as abolition of birth right to property, property by survivorship, half share for daughters, conversion of women's limited estate into an absolute estate, abolition of caste in matters of marriage and adoption, and the principle of monogamy and divorce. (quoted in Sarkar, 2016: 192)

Thus, the Bill sought to codify the diverse customary and Hindu laws endorsed by the *dharamshastras*,[1] which were at the root of gender, caste/class, and economic inequalities in India. Christophe Jaffrelot asserts that both Nehru and Ambedkar were attached to this code and perceived it to be "one of the cornerstones of the modernisation of India" (2009: 11). The Hindu Code Bill was intended to facilitate women's access to

financial independence, making them equal stakeholders in the economic prosperity and productivity of the nation-state. By doing so, it also aimed to "rectify those aspects of the Hindu Law which relegate women outside the social folds, with no hope, security and future" (Sarkar, 2016: 193).[2]

In fact, the Bill demonstrates Ambedkar's commitment to deconstructing the redundant aspects of Hindu law, which reduce women to being the spiritual and/or cultural upholders of the family and nation-state. As Ambedkar asserts:

> No law passed by the Indian Legislature in the past or likely to be passed in the future can be compared to it [the Hindu Code] in point of its significance. To leave inequality between class and class, between sex and sex, which is the soul of Hindu society, untouched and to go on passing legislation relating to economic problems is to make a farce of our Constitution and to build a palace on a dung heap. This is the significance I attached to the Hindu Code. (quoted in Zelliot, 2003: 212)

Although the Hindu Code Bill had a strong potential to set right the deprivations suffered by Hindu women, it was equally tasked with standardizing and codifying Hindu customary practices, and it had its limitations. For instance, many feminist critics argue that although proposed under the "rhetoric of liberation of women" (Agnes, 1999: 78), the Hindu law reform was entwined with the idea of national (Hindu) integration. Critics like Archana Parashar (1992) and Flavia Agnes (1999) assert that the state's motives to legislate man–woman relationships were driven by the need to "integrate Hindus from three different political regimes, i.e. British India, the princely states and the tribal regions into one nation. This could best be done by bringing them under one law" (Agnes, 1999: 79). According to Parashar:

> The hidden agenda for Hindu law reform was unification of the nation through uniformity in law. This could be best achieved by re-defining the rights given to women. Through the re-orientation of female roles the state could replace the claim of religion and religious institutions over people's lives. While professing that it was bound by the Constitution, the state projected the image of a continuity with the past (by preserving the provisions from the ancient sacred law) to bring in selective reforms. (1992: 140)

The codification of the Hindu family laws was a pertinent move within this context. In fact, to set the so-called empowering sections of the Bill aside and analyse the key parliamentary debates pertaining to its passage reveals a deeply inherent patriarchal bias.[3] Chitra Sinha highlights how the parliamentary debates (1941–56) relating to the institution of the Hindu Code Bill reflected the "incongruous ideologies" of the time (2007: 50). While there was a liberal outlook towards facilitating women's access to legal privileges, the state was simultaneously eager to accommodate the views of the religious orthodoxy, which emphasized women's centrality within the customary rituals of Hindu community: "The 'pativrata' (domesticated ideal mother) dedicated to progeny became the signifier for the immense virtues of Hindu religion" (Sinha, 2007: 51).

Alternatively, men were conveniently absolved of any accountability for polygamous relations, foreclosing the possibility of redefining gender relations:

> But now it has become rather common […] that educated girls have the habit of picking readymade husbands who have already got a wife and five or six children. It is not enough to make laws: but it is necessary to propagate these laws and propagandize these laws in order to educate our young girls in the direction of monogamy. That is very necessary. (Government of India, 1948: section II)

Such debates around sexuality wreaked havoc on women's status as individuals. The romanticization of the family, and marriage within it, worked against the idea of individual women who could experience their life and assert their sexuality on their own terms. For instance, the figure of the educated young woman was invested with the negative consequences of western modernity, and Hindu society could accept women's professional careers only so far as they contributed to the finances of the family and did not breach the patriarchal heterosexual boundaries of marriage and sexuality. As Mary E. John and Janaki Nair assert:

> The ideal Indian (Hindu) married "new woman" […] was still the ground on which questions of modernity and tradition were framed, she was the embodiment of boundaries between licit and illicit forms of sexuality, as well as the guardian of the nation's morality. (1998: 8)

Such limiting perceptions call for a thorough reengagement with what Seemanthini Niranjana calls the "matrix of sexualisation" (2005: 481):

> The matrix specifies certain codes of moral conduct within the community and is often responsible for the active espousal of conceptions of the feminine. It contains injunctions regarding shame and honour, marriage and motherhood, and working towards regulating the movement of women, their activities, dress and even speech. (Niranjana, 2005: 480)

In fact, there should be a delinking of home from the cultural reproduction of women's sexuality in order to expose the political implications embedded in the domestic. The novel *Chittacobra* interrogates the relationship between home, women, and sexuality. By doing so, it calls for a reconfiguration of the hierarchical grids of gender roles as institutionalized by the Hindu Code Bill. The protagonist Manu turns unhomely, breaking the sanctimonious facade of her marriage to her husband Mahesh. She candidly expresses her dissatisfaction with the gendered terrain of marital domesticity, so endorsed by the structures of the state:

> I do not know what I would like to be. I have a lot of empty-hollow time. Sometimes I think that I should be an actor … sometimes I feel like writing a PhD thesis … teach at a college or … supervise some ongoing work at a factory … I want to stand in fray for the Legislative Assembly elections … roam around the world, nurse the patients in hospital, admit into a mission … write poems. (Garg, 2013/1979: 131)[4]

The variety of options she considers does not indicate her confused state of mind. On the contrary, Manu wants to delve deeper into the recesses of her being, discovering aspects of her identity that are not defined by her roles of an ideal wife and mother. Thus, home acquires a new definition for Manu, who experiences it as an extension of her subjectivity.

It becomes what Rashmi Varma terms a viable "place where to speak from, a place of women's productive work and artistic and literary expressions and a place from where to challenge the debilitating anomie" of the asymmetrical relations of gendered citizenship (2012: 28).

As home acquires a new definition in the narrative, marriage is also desanctified and defamiliarized. Unlike more conventional literary narratives, Garg does not portray Manu and Mahesh as embroiled in marital discord per se. She suggests that there is no need to justify Manu's extra-marital affair with Richard: it is rooted in desire that is based on volition and mutual reciprocity, something her so-called legitimate marriage could not provide. Manu's relationship with Richard may transgress the juridico-legal mandate favouring monogamy within marriage but, for the author, it becomes a viable means to reconceptualize the female body and female agency. This offers a significant challenge to the "high cultural value attached to wifehood, morality, fidelity to husband, restraint, maintaining of family honor and so on" (Niranjana, 2005: 478). Garg's critique further problematizes seemingly innocuous concepts like love and intimacy within marriage, aligning them with the socio-political, economic, and cultural structures of society and by extension, the nation. Mahesh highlights how the "institutionalisation of marital adjustments" (Dhawan, 2011: 160) has strengthened the very foundations of the patrilineal, patriarchal, and virilocal arrangement of familial and kinship norms in India:[5]

> If every husband would fall in love with his wife, who would care for the mundane but important matters of society? Children would be neglected. Business and Politics would come to a standstill. Men and women would be too absorbed in each other and the country would go to dogs. (92)

It is evident that juridico-political discourses, defining conditions for entry into or exit from marriage, limit themselves to certain obvious facts, like the age of maturity and terms of marital cohabitation and divorce,[6] but do not even bother to acknowledge the "ambiguity in choice and petty coercions of family members" (Dhawan, 2011: 153) that force men and women to submit to the invisible abstractions of patriarchy.

Moreover, the idea of marital adjustment is so deeply engrained in societal norms that it is normalized as a socially legitimate act. Such compromises are reflected in the way the gendered asymmetry privileges a masculinist regime within everyday marital life. For instance, male desire within and without marriage is naturalized to such an extent that grave issues like marital rape are systemically diluted in the name of preserving so-called marital sanctity.[7]

During the first few years of their marriage, Manu and Mahesh live through the systemic violence which has both legal and societal sanction attached to it: "I had always known it. I knew when we got married that it was nothing more than a marriage of convenience for Mahesh. All the love was from my side" (88). In fact, Mahesh frankly confesses to Manu that since he does not "believe in the institution of marriage" (89), he has never considered the ties of marriage to be binding. This confession, after ten years of cohabiting with Manu in a conjugal bond, comes from a patriarchal warped logic that takes the asymmetry of gender relations for granted. It does not even deter him from enjoying the fruits of marriage: sexual relations with Manu who then gives birth to his

legitimate progeny. At the same time, he can never understand what marriage entails for women, how a new home structured by affinal ties with strangers, a new set of rules and authorities could spell out oppression.[8]

Manu does not seem to have the courage to confront Mahesh. Instead, she constantly asks herself "[w]hether Mahesh loves me or not? What if he does not love me at all? Is it possible?" (88). She has been conditioned and socialized to regard marriage as the be all and end all of her life. As Mahesh tells her, "after our marriage, you wanted to do everything that you thought an average Indian wife should do to make her husband happy" (87). Thus, women are often socialized to be self-effacing, their subjectivity becoming akin to a mirror which reflects the quotidian power of men within and without the home. Consequently, their potential to forge an independent self is severely curtailed. More to the point, the majority of women, after having invested so much emotional energy, are not left with any alternative than to stay on in such humiliating marriages. They can opt for divorce, but lack of familial support, societal biases, and absence of financial freedom often discourage women from escaping an oppressive marital relationship. Had Manu blamed Mahesh, it would have inevitably led to the implication of failure, that is, she as a wife could not even garner her husband's love.

In fact, prior to the codification of the Hindu Code Bill, marriage was considered too sacrosanct an institution to be interrogated. For example, religious organizations like Sanatan Dharma Rakshini Sabha declared "we would not allow a woman to get divorce and marry again even if her first husband became a lunatic or a convert" (quoted in Sinha, 2007: 55). Opposition to divorce was the consequence of a complex network of beliefs, rituals, and customary practices, which emphasized the need to protect and preserve the sexual purity of women. While fathers were expected to give away virgin daughters (*kanyadan*) in marriage, the husband was entitled to deploy his wife's sexuality within marriage to produce progeny. In both cases, however, patriarchy betrayed an inherent fear in relation to virgin (pre-marriage) and non-virgin (post-marriage/ divorce) female sexuality, unleashed from the bonds of marriage. As mentioned above, the control and incarceration of women's sexuality were the means to "maintain and ensure patrilineal succession" (Chakravarti, 2003: 35). The right to divorce would have turned such patriarchal arrangements on their head.

In a survey conducted by the Committee on the Status of Women in India (which framed the *Towards Equality* report in 1974) on issues concerning marriage, 73.96 per cent of parents believed they should have an exclusive right to fix their daughters' marriage (Sharma K and Sujaya, 2012: 299). The figure reveals not simply an overwhelming concern with daughters' marital alliances but an inherent fear of women's individual agency against caste endogamy and patriarchal family protocols, perceived as natural and given. Manu's extra-marital relationship marks her rebellion against such delimiting structures. She values her relationship with Richard because it gives her the space to be, to experience her mind, body, and soul as extensions of each other. Here, the author ensures that the portrayal of an extra-marital relationship is not merely perceived as a means of escaping from the deprivations of matrimony. On the contrary, it problematizes the hegemonic constructions of the patriarchal family as the "only legitimate structure of the family, rather than one among many" (Sen, Biswas, and Dhawan, 2011: 2). Garg's portrayal also exposes the shortcomings inherent in the

dominant discourses on sexuality, which perceive women's experience of it only under the purview of violence.[9]

Flavia Agnes suggests that the earlier campaigns (1970s–1980s) of the Indian women's movement that addressed violence towards women

> seldom questioned conservative notions of women's chastity, virginity, servility and the concept of the "good" and the "bad" woman in society […] [They did not] address the basic questions of power balance between men and women, women's economic rights within the family and their status within society. (1997: 522)

Moreover, it was rarely acknowledged that sexuality is integrally related to women's expression of self and identity, and that it has been circumscribed by the asymmetry of gender relations in the present context. The rights of women to their own body, so popularized by the movement during this time, were also perceived in relation to sexual violence within and outside marriage. Though significant in major aspects, such a theorization of women's sexuality only within the rubric of violence tended to circumscribe any alternative construction of women's sexuality.

However, *Chittacobra* hints at the insecurity built in to patriarchy's stance on women's sexual purity. The fact that sexual intimacy outside marriage might lead to the conception of children who could illegitimately inherit the family name and property under coparcenary rights creates a sense of permanent anxiety for patriarchy. The implications of concepts such as fidelity or infidelity within marriage and the concomitant double standards of morality are exposed when Manu asks Mahesh what would happen if she had an affair with someone. He is rendered speechless at first and tells her meekly, "If possible, do not tell about it to me ever" (90).

Love's labour's lost? – Assertions of sexuality within/ without the intimate domestic

Constructions of the female body and sexuality are integral to the gendered power relations in society, constantly invoked on a scale of morality, and impinged by factors like shame and honour. To evade this bind, female sexuality must be conceived outside the strictures of marriage, and not merely function as a site for contested expressions of both tradition and modernity. Such a task calls for a reconceptualizing of masculinities and femininities, involving a thorough reengagement with the "matrix of sexualisation" (Niranjana, 2005: 481). It also implies that a woman's sexuality must be liberated from an always-already guilt-ridden state, constantly imposed on her by a patriarchal epistemology.

Manu becomes an agent of her sexuality as she learns to perceive marital sex as separate from patriarchal injunctions that legitimize it only in the context of motherhood. She perceives herself not merely as a desirable object but an agential subject, well versed in the game of sexual intimacy: "To love is to play, it is an art, a need, body's requirement" (98). She makes elaborate preparations for the anticipated sexual encounter with Mahesh, experiencing her body in its varied aspects: bathing, cleaning her feet and so on with a clear agenda in her mind, that is, to prepare her body as a sexed body, proficient in the

techniques of love making. However, this preparation is supplemented by a discerning attitude towards the sexual act, that is, the sexual act could be just a manifestation of bodily needs and nothing else: "Mahesh has entered my body. The intercourse between man and woman is nothing but an inherited intense longing in every man to fill a hole" (99). Thus, Garg illustrates that a woman's body is not simply a site of cultural signifiers, but is also a corporeal or material body. It is both constructed by and responds to what Elizabeth Grosz describes as "the sensations provided by a purely anatomical body" (1994: 79).

Moreover, Manu's awareness of her femininity constituted through the body is not an innocuous celebration of female desire and her sexuality. It runs in parallel to an insight into the violence inherent in this intimacy. Manu knows how intimacy is achieved at a certain price, which includes a compromise with patriarchy:

> My eyes are closed … I could clearly hear in my room the tinkle of anklets […]. The music is fascinating. Whenever I am with Mahesh, that sound holds me in thrall […]. Women who sell their bodies immerse themselves in worship of flesh once they have the money in hand. But they worship music and dance too. (98)

Here, Manu's cognitive self pierces through the facade of sexual intimacy in marriage. She analogizes the body in intimacy to the body in sex work, raising questions such as, "can there be any genuine intimacy at all?"

The way sex workers are denigrated and criminalized by society and law clearly highlights the sexual perversions integral to the patriarchal structures in India. While home becomes a domain of the good woman because she is the repository of family honour, "prostitute" becomes a term of insult, suggesting someone who is "merely a sex object that does not deserve society's respect" (Menon, 2012: 132). The nuanced representation of marital sex between Manu and Mahesh clearly hints at the way in which no woman can afford to be innocent of the price she pays in the name of intimacy. Put another way, the novel shows that patriarchal institutions like marriage operate through categories like good and bad women, and that these categories are fluid.[10] In this context, Garg's text is geared towards contesting the overbearing paradigm of structural inequalities.

In *Chittacobra*, Manu's relationship with Richard foregrounds varied aspects of her subjectivity. Manu likes to spend time with him primarily because she perceives this relationship as not based on any intention to claim or possess the other person: "His name was his; mine remained mine. He did not say, you are mine. All he said was Manu… Manu… Manu…! I did not say, my owner (swami)… all I said was, Richard… Richard… Richard…" (66). Apparently, in their relationship, there is no trace of the paternalism that usually accompanies marital ties, leading to the asymmetry of gender relations. Manu knows they cannot be together, not simply because both of them are married but because they know what marriage entails. She would like to carve an ideal space of mental compatibility and companionship with Richard, having failed at it within the dynamics of marriage.

In fact, one is impelled to reinvestigate the idea of intimacy in love now. Is it possible to be really intimate with anyone, so as to achieve a sense of completeness in the relationship? Is it a viable idea to locate your completeness in someone else? Are romance

and intimacy not inspired by a heteronormative ideal in which mutuality evolves within a larger structure of the pursuit of desire? There are instances in the novel wherein the charm of the relationship for Manu lies in the thrill of the chase, a masochist pining for the absent lover and longing for the union. For instance, when Richard wonders about the possibility of his marriage with Manu, she retorts: "Had you been my husband, you would have roamed around the world and I would have taken care of your children… In fact, I would have fallen in love with Mahesh then. I would have abandoned you for Mahesh" (129). Manu's response suggests how difficult it is for both men and women to escape the narrative of romance, which anticipates and structures the levels of intimacy between them. As such, Garg engages with ideas of sexual and romantic intimacy, insofar as they foreground the complex layers of emotional violence and power structures essential to them. In this light, an extra-marital relationship cannot be a solution to the gendered asymmetry experienced within marriage. Rather, the attempt is to see how love, intimacy, and marriage tend to constrain women's lives within what Jana Sawicki calls "legitimate and illegitimate forms of sexual practices, thereby creating a hierarchy of sexual expression" (1991: 227).

Manu's aspirations to unite with Richard after 30 long years — when they will be old enough to be no longer constrained by societal injunctions — reveal her ways of bargaining with the warped logic of gender and social disciplining. An old woman is outside the reproductive logic of patriarchy, and ceases to be a source of anxiety for her immediate family. As Manu states, "A sixty year old woman does whatever she wants to do and her actions are not construed against the social conventions" (82). With grey hair and a wrinkled body she will also be liberated from objectification by the male gaze. This highlights how women are (de)valued on the basis of certain constructed notions of youth and beauty. Manu asserts: "My value is derived from my beautiful body" (102). Manu is an object of envy and admiration for other women in her social circle, who quickly pronounce that she is out there to entangle men in the charm of her beauty, and that she must have undergone a "cosmetic procedure like face-lifting" (106) to look this beautiful. More to the point, Garg reveals how a woman's body and sexuality are constantly mapped on the scale of chastity. She is to look beautiful not for herself but for the legitimate owner of her body, her husband. Manu's desire to grow old suggests the need to reconceptualize the woman's body and liberate it from the shackles of patriarchal and masculinist underpinnings. This reconceptualization of the body — as lived/experienced in everyday life — is important in order to arrive at a coherent understanding of the self.

The author also highlights the bitter truth about marriage: that a woman's value within marriage is calculated by her beautiful body which adorns the mechanicity of housework, facilitating the reproduction of labour power. Women's domestic tasks are neither appreciated nor are they considered work. Critics such as Christine Delphy and Ruth Milkman have highlighted the unfair division of housework, asserting that the domestic mode of production becomes the base of the "patriarchal system of subordination of women to men in contemporary industrial societies" (Delphy, 1988: 263). As Milkman asserts:

> The productive activity of women in the home is accorded lower status than any other occupation: housework is a "labor of love" in a society whose universal standard of value is money. Because it is not remunerated with a wage, housework does not directly produce surplus

> value. However, it does maintain and reproduce the ability of family members to work productively, their labor power, which they sell in a market for wage. (1976: 81)

Thus, women's productive labour in the household is devalued, or in fact erased. This is evident in measures adopted by the first few Five Year plans initiated by the Planning Commission of India, wherein women were not recognized as a category of workers. Instead, the image of the "producer patriot" (Deshpande, 1993: 27) was propounded, which was exclusively tied to an institutional reorganization of the nation's economic capacities. This systemically excluded women from the rhetoric of production, rendering their labour and work invisible.

However, Manu's imagination leads her to turn this social invisibility into a literal aspect of her life. She wants to be invisible, seemingly inert, just like an insect. By so doing, she hopes to be spared of a thankless routine of domestic chores. In fact, it is their extreme visibility on the domestic front, which reduces women's labour to being a given fact:

> I would have laid in a dark corner of a room or under a sofa, outside people's gaze, no one would have looked at me even… no one would have knocked at my door… I wish I would have disgusted people in the first sight itself. (100)

Thus, Manu's musings open up viable spaces to interrogate the institutional structures of the state, which not only maintain but also promote the sexual division of labour. They also contest the way women's work and income are perceived only within a reproductive framework, as mentioned above.

Towards a creative reforging of gendered habitus: A woman writer's vision

Manu's desire to unite with Richard at 60 years of age reflects the limited and limiting options available to women in Indian society. Her efforts at recarving her identity seem to fall flat precisely because she cannot possibly have access to an independent expression of her sexuality outside what Meenakshi Thapan has termed, in another context, "the prevailing and influential social discourse" (1997: 7). The question then is how women can make a dent in this dominant discourse. Is it even possible for them to do so? Here, Mridula Garg suggests that Manu's efforts to express herself not only to herself, but through writing, could lead to a significant transformation of the social code. Richard's love is significant not in itself but because it facilitates Manu's arrival at a transformed understanding of the self, and of herself as a writer.

Writing becomes an effective tool in the hands of a woman author, equipping her to interrogate the patriarchal underpinnings of the institutional, epistemological, and ideological structures of the nation. As Garg asserts in an interview with *Tehelka*, "Whenever people ask me what do I mean by being a woman? I tell them, it means to be a writer" (2013a: 171). This statement indicates the ability to express oneself creatively and otherwise, without any sense of guilt. Garg does not simply write about the female body but also endorses its claims to pleasure and fulfilment. In doing so, she "challenges the

masculine monopoly on the construction of femininity, the female body and woman" (Verma, 1997: 283), proposing an alternative feminist aesthetic. This alternative aesthetic can be described to use Ashley Tellis's words, as

> a literary aesthetic of corporeality that allows for a bodily and sexual politics which creates a liberatory space of desire […]. Its achievement is in the main literary and it is through the literary that the spaces for the radical and the sexual are formed. (2016: 363, 366)

In fact, via Manu Garg also suggests that:

> It is easy for a woman to commit herself to more than one relationship at a time, without fragmenting her own self and consciousness. This thought is different from the traditional mindset of Indian society, that's why they could not accept my novel. (2013a: 164)[11]

This connects to the larger argument that women's concerns cannot be understood only individualistically. In fact, their issues, sexuality, and any theorization of women's agency cannot be perceived as separate from social issues but integrally related to the metanarrative of power relations — state, family, kinship, tradition, community — affecting women on the one hand, and other marginalized sections of society on the other.

In *Chittacobra*, Manu problematizes the post-independence era in her writings, arguing that the fruits of independence have not been equitably distributed among peasants, the poor, dalits, tribals, lower castes, and women. She dwells on the convenience with which the post-independence government settled itself into the violent institutions and epistemological structures left behind by the colonial government: "Let's embrace Independence Day | Unemployment, Hunger, Police atrocity | Newspaper rumour all. | How is it possible? | When we are free for the last 30 years?" (138). It is evident that the precarious dream of a just nation broke down in the 1970s. The politics of the "welfare state" remained largely skewed in its approach to women and vulnerable sections of society. Progress, modernity, and development were to be qualified as they were conceptualized within a patriarchal rubric; only an elite comprising the upper castes and some members of the middle classes in India were able to place their vision on the table. In fact, it was not before the sixth Five Year Plan that a separate chapter was included on women, titled "Women and Development", suggesting a subtle shift in the conceptualization of women as participants in the development process of the country rather being mere beneficiaries. Subsequently, it was substituted by the phrase "Gender and Development", signalling a structural concern with gender in national policy. However, women were still perceived through the prism of their respective familial and communal status. Thus, the new leaders of the developing nation could not "view the essential unity of the women's question in terms of the requirements of an overall societal change through both structural and attitudinal changes" (Sharma and Sujaya, 2012: xxxi).

Alternatively, a woman's perception of the oppressive structures and value systems of the nation reflects on its inequitable class and caste systems, as well as unequal gender relations. Though Manu has never travelled across the world like Richard, this does not mean her perspective and experience of the world is in any way lesser than his. Richard's visit to Bangladesh in 1971 is driven by philanthropy. He had joined the

Church so that he could reform the lives of the poor and marginalized across the world: "I like doing two things: to roam around the world and to help people. The Church has facilitated me to perform both these tasks" (40). His "roaming" of Asia and Africa is based on an Orientalist outlook, which perceives the world in terms of binaries — rich and poor. For him, there is still hope for India in the 1970s, as it has not given in to the destiny of capitalism entirely, and Gandhian principles could be a viable alternative. However, Manu is far more discerning in her insistence on how the dialectics of history can no longer be perceived through the lens of Gandhian principles: "we [Indians] have resigned ourselves to the historical destiny" (73). The fact that the advent of capitalism was facilitated by imperialism in India is just one side of the story. The ancillary reality was how deeply it had engrained itself into the feudal setup and extant caste and gender hierarchies prevalent in India, which Richard falls short of perceiving in the course of his idealizations.

While women's bodies and sexualities were deployed as convenient tools to forge a veneer of cultural sovereignty and spiritual identity of the nation in the context of foreign rule, women's participation in politics remained contingent on the needs of nationalist discourse and what it expected of women in the public sphere. Although, under the aegis of Gandhi, women were called upon to participate in political campaigns such as the Non-Co-operation and Civil Disobedience movements and to spread the message of *satyagraha* and non-violence, this new-found liberation in the nationalist movement could not politically emancipate them. It delimited their engagement in the national cause within a particular idiom of religiosity. As Geraldine Forbes asserts: "the patriarchal nationalist efforts to mobilize women in the name of dharma proved inadequate to the task of politicizing women, ensuring continued participation, or acting as channels for the expression of their own interests" (1988: 54-55). Radha Kumar takes this argument further, stating that according to Gandhi, the experience of pregnancy and motherhood especially qualified women to spread the message of peace and non-violence. Gandhi created the image of the mother as a repository of spiritual and moral values and as a preceptor for men (Kumar, 1993: 82). More to the point, even though Gandhi called upon women to participate in the Civil Disobedience movement and *satyagraha*, he restricted their activity to mass picketing of liquor shops and drug shops, as to him, women were the prime victims of their husbands' use of such shops. He viewed this as a matter of moral purity in personal life. Salt, on the other hand, was an issue related to economic hardships Indians endured under the British rule, so it was an issue relevant to public life and not considered suitable for women (Kumar, 1993: 83). Evidently, Richard discounts all these factors in the process of glorifying Gandhian principles against imperialism and capitalism.

Furthermore, Garg's feminism is based on a sense of self-awareness, which reaches out to the other, forging bonds of solidarity: "I was one of those who had an infinite void within themselves, ready to soak up unhappiness/sadness. It was their nature to take all sadness — a symbol of an independent ego" (137). Her writings interrogate a dominant critical approach which assumes that women's subjective engagements are nothing more than personal musings. They propose an alternative way of negotiating patriarchal institutions like family and marriage. For instance, the novel *Chittacobra* does not simply highlight the disillusions and disappointments resulting from marriage, but also

questions the traditional concerns associated with wifehood, motherhood, and roles hitherto understood as essentially associated with women. Thereby, the novel asserts the need to reclaim women's bodies from becoming site and symbol of patriarchal and institutional control, especially as is evident in the drafting of the Hindu Code Bill. Herein lies the significance of Garg's contribution to women's writing in India. Literature, according to her, "should play its role for non-conformity" (1992: 103) by constantly rethinking and rejecting the traditional stereotypes ascribed to men and women. This plays a vital role in the process of social transformation as "slowly, even imperceptibly, it helps people to assimilate the greater awareness of the possibility of change and come to terms with a change in the image they have of themselves and their relationships with others" (Garg, 1992: 96).

Moreover, in many of her scholarly essays, Garg insists upon the urgency of liberating women from their stereotypical roles as "mother-wife provider and beloved" (1991: 411), representing them as individuals and women in all their various facets. Even as one talks about personal relationships, domestic life, and the sexual/gendered exploitation faced by women, it is imperative to relate these to the socio-economic and political realities and cultural inequities experienced by women on a daily basis. She rightly affirms in "The In-Between Women":

> I do not say that they [women] are not sexually exploited. They are. But they are subject to a far more complex form of exploitation as farmers, artisans, farm labourers, service caterers and industrial workers. Even their sexual exploitation is quite often a function of this larger exploitation. This wider canvas of their lives and struggle is quite often glossed over. (Garg, 1992: 104)

In this way Garg contests women's marginalization within literary and social discourses, which have "conspired to limit portrayals of women to sexual beings and projected their aspirations and agitations to the exclusion of their roles as social and economic beings" (Garg, 1991: 420). As Manohar Shyam Joshi puts it: "Mridula does not belong to any tradition, a word so dear to Hindi critics. She has a worldview and style of her own, which steers clear of Marxist doctrine, mythological throwback, regional cultural fix, in short all possible throwbacks" (quoted in Jain and Dutt Paliwal, 2010: xxii).

In the light of this argument, it can be proposed that Garg's language and style aspire to and succeed in claiming independence from the overarching "anxiety of male influence", which has hitherto dominated women's writings. Her work is marked by a sense of honesty, which "fights shy neither of experimentation nor of contradictions" (Garg, 1991: 422). This further aligns with her assertion that women's writing should liberate itself from a victim syndrome: "The real war is not between the sexes or genders but between an oppressive value system and the forces demanding equality of opportunity" (Garg, 2007: 359). Once this fact is acknowledged, it is easier to discern that women's issues are not divorced from larger social and political issues:

> The inequality in the share of genders in the control of resources and power structures was a part of the larger picture. Once this was understood, it was easy to see that the so-called women's issues were, in fact, social issues. The women writers […] emphasize the changes

> needed in the economic and political systems to deal with the degradation of environment and of the human psyche. (Garg, 2007: 359)

This article has attempted to highlight the Garg's feminist vision and literary honesty, emphasizing how women's voice, their subjectivity, and sexuality are deeply intertwined with the larger socio-political and economic structures of the nation. By doing so, the novel suggests an alternative but viable vision of the gendered contexts of nation.

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Notes

1. *Dharamshastras* are the Hindu law codes and/or manuals which illustrate human conduct based on moral righteousness. For instance the *Manusmriti* clearly defines wifehood and motherhood as the primary functions of upper-caste women in society. Women can acquire their identity and personhood only in relation to men, that is, their husbands. Moreover, domesticity is the only *sanskaar* available to upper-caste Hindu women. By following *strid-harma* and *pativratadharma* (loyalty to one's husband and his family), women help their husbands to perform his duty, which is giving birth to a son who could alleviate the sufferings of his parents and ensure deliverance for the family ancestors. Evidently, such conservative caste-based patriarchal laws leave no scope for negotiating women's rights as individuals in society. For details, see Chakravarti (1995).
2. As Jaffrelot states: "This questioning of the customs governing the private life of the Hindus aroused a profound emotion, not only among the traditionalists of the Hindu Mahasabha, but also among leaders of the Congress including Rajendra Prasad" (2009: 10). In fact, Ambedkar had to resign from the Cabinet on 27 September 1951 due to lack of sufficient interest on the part of members of parliament.
3. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the Hindu Code Bill apparently endorsed Hindu women's claims to gender equality by declaring bigamy punishable by law and giving them a right to institute divorce proceedings. In addition to this, women were also given a right to inherit paternal property. However, women often still gave away their rightful share in the property in favour of their brothers. Srimati Basu suggests that "women's decisions to give up their property rights implied that they were locked in a patriarchal system where they

'maximised their short-term priorities at the cost of undermining their long term material interests, and feelings of love and loyalty toward parents and the natal family were enacted in ways that bolstered male privilege'" (quoted in Majumdar, 2003: 2130).

4. Ellipses in the original. The novel *Chittacobra* (1979) has been read and analysed in the Hindi original, and I have translated selected quotations from the 2013 edition. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
5. Mridula Garg asserts: "Interestingly, marriage is considered necessary not only for women, but for men too. I feel this is a part of the security syndrome. The reason could be twofold: a culture so old that it has by now come to recognize the need for security above adventure, and in the general atmosphere of economic insecurity fed by large-scale unemployment, marriage insures all kinds of security: economic, sexual, and emotional, for both men and women. Yes, economic too, for even when women do not go outside the home to work, which increasingly they do now, they perform the essential function of family provider or the Annapoorna battling with Abhav (scarcity) as part of their upbringing" (Garg, 1991: 416).
6. As noted by the *Towards Equality* Report in its analysis of the Hindu Marriage Act 1955, "the various grounds on which a husband or a wife can obtain divorce are (a) living in adultery (b) conversion to other religion (c) insanity (d) incurable form of leprosy (e) venereal disease (f) renunciation, (g) where the respondent has not been heard of as being alive for a period of seven years or more […] (h) failure to resume cohabitation for a period of two years after the decree of judicial separation" (Sharma and Sujaya, 2012: 89).
7. Minister of State for Home, Haribhai Parathibhai Chaudhary said, in response to a written question by DMK's K. Kanimozhi on 30 April 2015 in Rajya Sabha, that the concept of marital rape does not apply in India, "It is considered that the concept of marital rape, as understood internationally, cannot be suitably applied in the Indian context due to various factors, including level of education, illiteracy, poverty, myriad social customs and values, religious beliefs, mindset of society to treat marriage as a sacrament" (Press Trust of India, 2015: n.p.).
8. Virilocality is constructed as the norm, which necessitates women's migration from one family to another and demands utmost sexual purity, accountability, and loyalty from women. "Constructed feminine virtues are used to mask the politics of marital relationships, which are discriminatory and hierarchical" (Dhawan, 2011: 159).
9. For instance, in the late 1970s–80s, most of the campaigns initiated by the Indian women's movement dwelt on issues of domestic violence, dowry, rape, sexual assault, sex determination, female infanticide, and so on and so forth, calling for suitable amendments in laws against such violence. Their weakness was evident in the way they sought solutions for such violence within the existing patriarchal framework, reducing women's sexuality as an adjunct to major discussions on violence against women.
10. Nivedita Menon (2012: 132) quotes a Malaysian feminist in this regard: "When sex workers are raped because of their profession, all women and girls are implicated in this act of violence. How? Sex workers are assaulted and abused because they are viewed as 'damaged goods' or sex objects who do not deserve society's respect. This means that all women and girls have to be careful about how they behave and dress, because the line between 'pure' and 'slutty' blurs and changes beyond our control and exposes us to a similar abuse perpetrated against sex workers".
11. Mridula Garg's *Chittacobra* was banned in 1980 under charges of obscenity (Section 292 of the IPC). The novel especially came under the moral scanner of the conservative section of the intelligentsia and writers as it was one of the foremost creative works written by a woman writer to talk about women's sexuality in a frank and honest manner. Garg had not trivialized women's sexuality, nor did she reduce the woman to being an object of the male gaze. Police attempted to arrest her one Friday evening from her house. She was later granted bail.

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