Caste and Sexuality in Modern Indian Literature

A Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the centrality of caste in modern Indian English fiction. Although caste permeates and is relayed through the religiously sanctioned practice of 'untouchability,' it hides in popular discourse. One pivotal strategy whereby caste tries to maintain itself is its investment into questions of sexuality. I argue that caste is anti-desire; its organizing principle is embedded in violence that impacts everyone to varying degrees, irrespective of one's caste status, but it affects sexual minorities and Dalits the most. The construction of the Brahmin-Dalit category defines, limits, and thus controls every other socially constructed category. Not only does the brahminic elite brahminize the socio-cultural geography, it performs caste in ways that seep into the embodied self of both upper castes and Dalits. All material and embodied spaces emerge as a theological version of Hinduism. Despite such underpinnings of caste, scholars (predominantly those with upper-caste backgrounds) have ignored caste. They have been happy to explore and challenge colonial power structures, but they have ignored Brahminization, which predates all forms of colonialism in India by centuries as a form of internal colonization of sexual minorities and non-brahminic Others. Drawing upon Indian literary fiction, queer theory, postcolonial discussion, and current public discourse in India, I seek to develop a queer theory that focuses on India and contributes to Dalit Studies. Although there have been discussions of queer sexualities and caste-based practices as separate issues, none, to my knowledge, has combined the two. Taking significant clues from Western queer theory, I turn to Indian sources, both past and present, with a major emphasis on ancient Sanskrit texts in which caste is embedded, to explore caste and caste's (violent) interplay with sexuality in present-day India. It argues that while modernity can trigger a positive change, a true transformation demands caste reform, not only for the benefit of outcasts but also for the upper-caste people.

The introduction of this thesis defines the field of caste in Indian Writing in English, ranging from Gandhian politics to the present-day discourse on caste. The first chapter examines the functioning of caste in a brahminic home in R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* (1945). The following chapters analyze the complexities of caste from both brahminic and anti-brahminic perspectives in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), providing an account of caste in upper-caste homes from queer, material, and linguistic perspectives. The final chapter of this study connects the epistemology of caste violence analyzed through Indian English fiction to two recent events: the socio-cultural response to the Covid 19 pandemic and the death of the upper-caste actor Sushant Singh Rajput, thus highlighting the variety of ways in which caste continues to shape and govern brahminic communities in contemporary India. The conclusion of this study demonstrates the pervasiveness of caste and hopes

to provoke further critical inquiry in the field of caste studies and sexuality studies that focus on India.

ABSTRAKT

Diese Dissertation untersucht die Schlüsselrolle der Kaste in der modernen indischen englischsprachigen Literatur. Obwohl das Kastensystem alle Lebensbereiche durchdringt und in der religiös sanktionierten Praktik der Unberührbarkeit“ weiterlebt, kommt es im allgemeinen Diskurs nicht vor. Eine zentrale Strategie, mit der sich das Kastensystem zu behaupten versucht, ist ihr Deutungsanspruch in Fragen der Sexualität. Ich behaupte, dass die Kastenordnung Lust feindlich ist; ihr Ordnungsprinzip beruht auf einer ihr inhärenten Gewalt, die jeden in unterschiedlichem Maße trifft, unabhängig von der eigenen Kastenzugehörigkeit, aber gerade sexuelle Minderheiten und Dalits (Unberührbare) trifft sie am stärksten. Die strenge Hierarchie der Brahmanen-Dalit-Pyramide definiert, begrenzt und kontrolliert somit jede andere gesellschaftlich begründete Ordnung. Die brahmanische Elite brahmanisiert (vereinnahmt in ihrem Sinn) nicht nur die soziokulturelle Landschaft, sie setzt die Kastenordnung auf eine Weise um, die in das Konzept des Selbst der oberen Kasten und der Dalits eindringt. Alle materiellen und verkörperten Räume erscheinen als theologische Version des Hinduismus. Trotz dieser Dominanz der Kaste ignorierten Wissenschaftler (vorwiegend solche, die selbst einer höheren Kaste angehören) die Kaste. Sie gaben sich damit zufrieden, koloniale Machtstrukturen zu erforschen und in Frage zu stellen, aber sie ignorierten die Brahmanisierung (den Einfluss der Brahmanen), die durch die Jahrhunderte vor allen Formen des Kolonialismus in Indien als eine Form der internen Kolonialisierung von sexuellen Minderheiten und Nicht-Brahmanen existierte. Ausgehend von indischer Literatur, der Queer-Theorie, dem postkolonialen und dem aktuellen öffentlichen Diskurs in Indien versuche ich, eine Queer-Theorie zu entwickeln, die sich auf Indien konzentriert und zu den Dalit-Studien beiträgt. Es gab Diskussionen über queere Sexualitäten und kastenbasierte Praktiken, doch wurden diese als getrennte Themen behandelt und meines Wissens bisher nicht in Kombination untersucht. Ich nehme wichtige Anhaltspunkte aus der westlichen Queer-Theorie auf und wende mich indischen Quellen zu, sowohl aus der Vergangenheit als auch aus der Gegenwart. Ein Hauptaugenmerk liegt dabei auf alten Sanskrit-Texten, um dasKastensystem und das gewalttätige Zusammenspiel der Kastenordnung im Hinblick auf die Sexualität im heutigen Indien zu untersuchen. Ich behaupte, dass die heutige Zeit zwar eine positive Veränderung anstoßen kann,

eine echte Transformation jedoch eine grundlegende Reform der Kastenordnung erfordert, nicht nur zum Nutzen der Ausgestoßenen, sondern auch für die oberen Kasten selbst.

Die Einleitung dieser Arbeit definiert das Feld der Kaste in der indischen Literatur in englischer Sprache, ausgehend von der Zeit Gandhis bis zum heutigen Diskurs über Kasten. Das erste Kapitel dieser Dissertation untersucht die Funktionsweise der Kaste in einem brahmanischen Haus in R.K. Narayans *Der Englischlehrer* (1945.) Die darauf folgenden Kapitel analysieren die Komplexität der Kaste sowohl aus brahmanischen als auch aus anti-brahmanischen Perspektiven in Arundhati Roys *Der Gott der kleinen Dinge* (1997) und *Das Ministerium des äußersten Glücks* (2017). Es handelt sich um eine Darstellung der Kastenzugehörigkeit in den Häusern der oberen Kaste aus queerer, materieller und sprachlicher Perspektive. Das abschließende Kapitel dieser Untersuchung setzt die Epistemologie der Macht der Kaste, analysiert anhand der beschriebenen indischen englischsprachigen Literatur, in Verbindung mit zwei aktuellen Ereignissen: der soziokulturellen Reaktion auf die Covid-19-Pandemie und dem Tod des Schauspielers Sushant Singh Rajput, der der obersten Kaste angehörte. Diese Betrachtung hebt die Vielfalt der Wegehervor, auf denen Kaste weiterhin brahmanische Gemeinschaften im heutigen Indien prägt und dominiert. Das Fazit dieser Untersuchung zeigt die weite Verbreitung der Bedeutung der Kaste. Ich hoffe, weitere kritische Untersuchungen auf dem Gebiet der Kasten- und Sexualitäts-Studien, die sich auf Indien konzentrieren, anzuregen.

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Contents

I
Introduction

This study analyzes caste and caste's interface with sexuality in three Indian novels in English: R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* (1945), and two novels by Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). Caste is pivotal to these novels. Reading Narayan's novel, written in British India, and Roy's two postcolonial novels suggests that democracy has not weakened caste; rather, it has modernized caste. This study aims to demonstrate how, and why, caste plays such a vital role in brahminic culture. Caste imposes itself on people from its mundane impositions such as how one should pray or perform a certain religious ritual to major ones regarding whom one can love and against whom one must practice untouchability, thus maintaining social order by regulating people and their sexuality. I am using these three literary texts in order to demonstrate how powerfully caste operates in everyday life and yet how it resists analysis. There has been some recent scholarly discussion of queer sexualities in India (Menon 2018; Reddy 2005; Vanita and Kidwai 2001) and much has been written about caste (Faleiro 2021; Guru and Sarrukai 2019; Zaidi 2020) but, no one, to my knowledge, has combined the two. I seek to develop a critical framework for reading the ways in which caste impacts sexual outcasts, Dalits[1] or former 'Untouchables,' as well as upper-caste people, and thus contribute to Dalit and queer studies in India. In what follows, I will make a few remarks about my motivation in engaging with the issue of caste and sexuality. I will then elaborate on how my thesis is structured, its key terms, why I chose certain texts and not others, and why I chose certain methodologies.

Arundhati Roy's essays on the Kashmir conflict (2020; 2008) and the Indian caste system[2] (2014) struck me in a way that brought about a shift in my thinking about the dominant brahminic discourse that governs and organizes social order through oppression and erasure of non-brahminic others. Previously, I knew about these issues only from the dominant nationalist perspective, and if there were alternative viewpoints they were not in the public domain. Caste-based discrimination and exclusion and the practice of untouchability are everyday occurrences in Indian life, but they either go unremarked or are narrated in a nationalist way, stressing Indian democracy and

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[1] The term Dalit was coined by the activist Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) in the late nineteenth century and taken up in the first half of the twentieth century by Babasaheb Ambedkar (1891-1956), the most influential leader of the Dalit movement, and also an architect of the Indian Constitution (Chatterjee 2016, 280). In Sanskrit, Dalit means broken or scattered, whereas in Hindi it means oppressed.

[2] In Hinduism's founding texts the caste system is referred to as *varnashrama dharma* or *chaturvarna*, the system of four varnas: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (soldiers), Vaishyas (traders), and Shudras (servants). Outside of these varnas are the avarna (out)castes, the Ati-Shudras, subhumans, whose presence, touch, and shadow are considered to be polluting by upper-caste Hindus.

presenting its institutions as fair and just. In contrast, Roy's essay on the Indian caste system contends that India's most contentious issues are connected to caste. Once, she quipped, "[C]aste is the engine that runs modern India" (quoted in Younge 2019, para. 4). Elsewhere, she wrote, "Ask any village policeman in India what his job is, he'll probably tell you it is to 'keep the peace.' That is done, most of the time, by upholding the caste system" (Roy 2014, 22). Not only does such an answer echo British colonial rule, it also powerfully evokes Brahminism, which predates colonialism by centuries. Roy's claims hit hard because their truth is undeniable. While upper-caste communities have dismissed Roy's insights as cynical, I have chosen to examine her radical politics. Although she does not elaborate, Roy's remark that caste is the engine that runs India is the starting point of this thesis that examines the mechanics of this "engine," focusing on its centrality in brahminic discourse that creates and defines sexual and caste outcasts.

A few months ago in Berlin, I unexpectedly met a close friend of mine from India whom I have known since childhood and who was traveling outside of India for the first time. She is in her early fifties, middle-class, Brahmin, and a happily married mother of three teenage daughters. I always saw her as an honest, intelligent, and fairly independent woman. We showed our mutual joy in our chance meeting. She asked me what I was doing in Berlin and when I told her that I was writing about caste, she found my research topic redundant. To her, caste was an obsolete and oppressive system that had disappeared from present-day India. Although I was already well into my research and thought that I could see Indian society differently and clearly because I had been away from India for a long time, her matter-of-fact manner initially made me question the very premise of my thesis. I wondered whether I was engaging with an issue that struck those living in present-day India as outdated and whether my work may, in fact, be fueling caste discourse in ways that might be harmful. Since I could not simply ignore her dismissal of my research topic, I asked my friend a few personal questions about the practice of untouchability and the subordination of Untouchables. I asked her whether she would share a meal with an 'Untouchable' person. She thought for a while and said, 'No.' There was silence, and I did not press her further but asked her about her impressions of Berlin. She told me that she thought it was a lovely city and that, unlike India, she felt safe in Berlin's public spaces. This aspect of the city made both a pleasant and most decisive impression on her. At one point, we saw two tall women, walking hand in hand in our direction, openly exhibiting their homosexuality. They sat at the table opposite ours. My friend said, "Oh! they also have hijras [intersex] here." Hijra is a culturally loaded term that, in a brahminic context, evokes meanings associated with untouchability. It bothered me later that I did not question her homophobic utterance, even if it was intended without malice. By calling those two women hijras, she effectively distanced herself from them. By calling them hijras, one not only 'unsees'

queer people but ‘straightens’ them into heterosexuals. I also realized that while we could talk about a range of themes including sexual ones, our talk remained within the heterosexual domain. Her honest ‘No’ to my earlier question concerning Untouchables, her experience of walking alone and feeling safe in Berlin city, her reference to the lesbian couple as hijras, and my cowardice in not initiating a talk about queer sexualities reveal the strength of both caste and heterosexuality over ‘well-intentioned’ Indians like us.

To function properly, all modern societies organize themselves in ways that require classification of things and people, but their emphases, in principle**,** remain on organization and inclusion. Indian society organizes itself by embracing the caste system, thus making inequality and exclusion the fundamental constituents of its organization. Therefore, even though India is a democracy, caste-induced inequalities are pervasive. The first thing any visitor in India sees is societal indifference to inequality—the most obvious being the difference between the rich few and the impoverished masses. Second, the collective indifference toward the public display of filth and squalor, a reality that hardly bothers Indians of all backgrounds. Interestingly, not only foreign tourists but also the Indian elite sees the presence of filth in public spaces as a symbol of a lack of civic sense in people. Unlike unsuspecting foreign visitors, the Indian elite willfully misreads the situation, wresting it from the practice of untouchability, and thus perpetuating a system that guarantees upper castes a continuous supply of workers whom they call ‘Untouchables.’ Therefore, upper castes remain indifferent to public squalor and filth. They resist any radical effort at managing public filth because this can blur caste-based hierarchies. To an outsider, such everyday caste-inflected practices in the handling of filth and garbage may seem perplexing but, in a brahminic context, these practices make complete sense because upper castes equate public filth with the groups or communities that are marked as Untouchables. In so doing, upper-caste communities emerge as touchable, and thus they maintain their caste hegemony.

Also, brahminic communities privilege heterosexuality and caste purity to sustain their hegemony through clearly marked caste borders. While upper castes encourage caste-appropriate unions, they condemn cross-caste, love-based, and other (non)normative sexual unions as transgressive. Even in present-day India, upper-caste communities resist love marriages, and if they occur they remain within the upper-caste domain; marriages between Brahmins and Dalits are almost nonexistent. Despite such obsession with caste, it is seldom discussed. In academic discourse, the word caste frequently appears with other words such as subaltern, peasant, urban poor, and marginalized and so forth, thus losing the focus and scrutiny that it requires. I argue that such a striking absence of caste from popular discourse is strategic. Upper-caste scholars use the

term 'caste,' and then quickly move on to secular terms like equality, rights, and justice, and thus obviate the specificity of caste.

To illustrate how caste is sidelined in academic discourse, I turn briefly to Dipesh Chakrabarty's book, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (2002). Chakrabarty examines the challenges that modernity faces in India in ways that emphasize colonialism, but ignore Brahminism. Without mentioning caste or the practice of untouchability, Chakrabarty asks how we can characterize the peasant and the subaltern classes "whose life practices constantly challenge our 'modern' distinctions between the secular and the sacred, between the feudal and the capitalist, between the non-rational and the rational?" (2002, xx) His "our" is ideologically tinted in both a colonial and a caste sense. By using it, he installs himself in the Western discourse and then uses its terms to question modernity: "How do we think about the global legacy of the European Enlightenment in lands far away from Europe in geography or history? […] How do we also construct critiques of popular violence that have […] torn apart […] nations of modern times?" (xxi). These are vital questions, but they examine only colonialism, not caste. Also, Chakrabarty's "our" works to support caste in a local context. After reinforcing the boundaries between rational and non-rational, he distances himself from the non-rational, which can be read as a euphemism for Untouchables and other social outcasts. By (mis)using secular terms such as "subaltern," Chakrabarty erases caste, but emphasizes the "imperial mode" that Western powers adopt in seeing "modernity as coeval with the idea of progress" (xix) which they enforce on countries like India. Chakrabarty asks, "Can the definition of […] some group as non–or *premodern* ever be anything but a gesture of the powerful?" (xix) This line of questioning or a rather critique of "the gesture of the powerful" in the postcolonial sense recurs often in postcolonial theory in which colonialism is challenged, but Brahminism is ignored—that is, the caste principles that create social hierarchies and uphold the practice of untouchability.

My thesis engages with caste politics and with the epistemology of caste violence in present-day India. I do not compare or contrast caste with similar exclusionary systems such as racism. Both Indian and Western scholars equate caste with race (Beteille 1990; Kikon 2022; Singh 2018a),[3] my perspective differs. Although race and caste are comparable as both mark people as superior and inferior, unlike race, caste is fundamentally a religious idea embedded in Hinduism

[3] Caste and race are indeed comparable, but they are not identical. In brahmin contexts, treating them as the same amounts to erasing caste. However, when scholars treat them as the same, this is because they recognize both as forms of discrimination. In brahminic discourse, equating caste with race is also done to justify the caste system. It is argued, as in Gupta (2007), that caste, unlike race, is benign, and therefore it is misleading to compare the two. In colonial discourse, the example of caste is offered to legitimize colonialism If Gandhi extolled the Indian caste system (Roy 2014, 25-26), nineteenth-century Europe had many admirers of the Manusmriti (Doniger 1992, xviii-xxii).

that sanctions caste. Also, the difference between caste and racism manifests differently in everyday life. In the Western world, one acknowledges the presence of racism but denies being a racist oneself while in India, the opposite is true: People embrace their caste identities as Brahmins or Kshatriyas but do not see caste as an oppressive system. I focus mainly on caste and wherever I engage with race, it is to investigate some aspect of caste. One reason to focus on caste is that while much has been written about race, no comparable significant study has been produced on caste.

If we compare the issue of race in North America to caste in India, we see some obvious differences between the two. Race is frequently discussed in the United States whereas, in India**,** caste discussions are predominantly suppressed. One verifiable outcome of this divergent politics is that, unlike the Dalits in India, Black musicians, actors, sportspersons, writers, and politicians and other public figures have a considerable presence in North American culture. With regard to the Dalits in India, one struggles to make similar citations. Except for Dalit lawyer and politician Dr. Bhimrao Ambdekar and a handful of today's politicians, the list is almost blank. Here, I also want to point out that race in North America and caste in India have been very different. Considering the history of racism in America in the light of colonialism and slavery, one understands it better because unlike caste, which is woven into Hinduism (Ambedkar [1936] 2014, 348-356), race is not rooted in religion. It invites critique, analysis, and reform in Western culture and politics. However, the continuation of the more than 2,000-year-old caste system in India—whose people are, ethnically and culturally, more similar than different—is a conundrum. If caste is suppressed inside India, it is presented as a "domestic issue" in the histories of Indian diplomacy (Natarajan 2019, 23). And yet, caste has invited far less attention considering its history and the damage it has caused to non-brahminic people and their cultures. In India, people of all religious backgrounds observe caste (Thapar 2014, 35, 307-308). When upper-caste Hindus convert to other religions such as Islam, Christianity, or Buddhism, they continue to practice untouchability against Dalits in general, but also against those Dalits who have converted to escape the stigma of untouchability. Within Islam, Christianity, or Sikhism, as they are practiced in India, members of these religious communities observe caste-based hierarchies of high and low even when these religions do not espouse caste. In other words, although rooted in Hinduism, caste is culturally practiced across all religions in India. Dalit leader Ambedkar (1979-2003, vol. 12: 678) noted that a person who is an Untouchable to a Hindu is also an Untouchable to all non-Hindu communities in India.

Such a profound hold of caste on upper castes manifests itself in various ways. If a Dalit achieves significance in some field, not only is such a person differentiated from the rest of the Dalit community, he is compelled to assimilate into the upper-caste fold so that caste distinctions prevail. When the son of the great lyricist Shailender (1923-1966) openly mentioned the family's

Dalit status in his writing, he faced considerable pressure not to draw attention to it.[4] Since Shailender is considered one of the best twentieth-century Indian songwriters (Khanna 2018, paras. 1-3), he must be incorporated into the brahminic fold. How can a man of such stature be a Dalit? This is the underlying assumption that made upper-caste men put Shailender's son, who is openly Dalit, under pressure. Unlike many songwriters of his time, Shailender never used any surname which would indicate his caste. The sheer force of his talent is such that many automatically assume him to be upper-caste. The brahminic interest in erasing Shailender's Dalithood signposts that they do not want caste lines to intersect and thus smudge caste coherence. Considering the stigma of untouchability, a Dalit person may feel tempted to hide his caste, but it seems problematic when upper castes compel or coerce a Dalit to pose as an upper caste.

In order to explore the socio-cultural dynamics of caste, I rely primarily on Indian sources. While Western gender and queer theory, and queer theory that focuses on India, guide this thesis, I focus primarily on a range of Indian religious and philosophical sources and concepts embedded in texts such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* because of their strong continued performative force in everyday life. I refer to the ancient legal text *Manusmriti* or *Manava Dharmasastra* throughout this thesis, primarily Wendy Doniger's translation entitled *The Laws of Manu* (1992). The centrality of the *Manusmriti* in everyday Indian life is such that no study of Hindu family life and its attitude to caste, ritual, sexuality, and gender can ignore it. Commenting on the *Manusmriti,* Wendy Doniger writes: "More compendiously than any other text, it provides a direct line to the most influential construction of the Hindu religion and Indic society as a whole" (1991, xvii). Therein lies its relevance to my thesis. Since caste is specific to India, its study requires a focus on Indian sources. The application of (Western) queer theory to the Indian context works only for the tiny, English-speaking, urban, upper-caste minority, but it does not percolate through to the great majority of Indians. I argue that both postcolonial theorists and queer theorists seem to exclude caste from their work. Whereas postcolonial theorists focus on themes like colonialism, nationalism, gender, and governance by ignoring Brahminism, queer theorists seem to establish a more just and inclusive space for upper-caste queers by ignoring the Dalits. Two gay anthologies *Yarana: Gay Writing from South Asia* (1999) edited by Hoshang Merchant and *Whistling in the Dark* (2009) edited by R. Raj Rao and Dibyajyoti Sarma are significant works that focus on urban Indians. While the first book engages with the writings or experiences of elite gay men in India, the second book is so diverse—out of 21 interviews, six are of non-Indians from Iran, Sri Lanka,

[4] Shailender's son Dinesh Shankar Shailendra compiled a collection of his father's poems and wrote a preface to the book titled *Andar Ki Aag* (The Fire Within), in which he openly mentioned his family's Dalit status for which he was condemned by other (upper-caste) writers. The backlash even developed into violence. His house was ransacked in front of him and his wife (Viplav 2016, paras. 1-5).

Canada, Spain, Mauritius, and the United States—that it erases caste. Furthermore, Ruth Vanita and Salim Kidwai's landmark study *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from History and Literature* (2001) traces the history of homosexuality in India, but without engaging with the caste dimension of that history. The book's dominant milieu remains upper caste; it engages with the brahminic and Islamic elite of ancient, medieval, and modern India as if its social outcasts, both non-brahminic queers and non-elite brahminic masses, are not only Untouchable but also unwritable.

Vanita and Kidwai have made several important points regarding the presence of diverse sexualities in ancient and premodern India as well as the suppression of such histories by present-day brahminic India. They have shown that modern editions of the *Kamasutra,* a seminal work on sex and sexualities, exclude chapters that deal with the depiction of non-normative sex acts. They argue that texts and practices that embrace non-normative sexualities are either frequently censored and opposed or are read and framed as heteronormative. For example, Indian wedding rituals always assume a heteronormative form, even though Sanskrit scriptures bless the union of two souls, not two genders (Vanita 2004, 126). Also, the Hindu idea of "rebirth" and "disembodied spirit" makes the categories of gender less important (Vanita 2001, 30). Although these alternative readings of dominant texts and practices are significant, their excessive focus on the queer utopia in premodern and ancient India creates a false sense of pride and contentment among queer activists that ultimately harms queer movements in present-day India. Queer activists and scholars refer to *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from History and Literature* and claim that homosexuality has always existed in India and that homophobia came from the West, overlooking the fact that the very history and presence of caste in contemporary India belie such overarching claims. The presence of caste signals the dominance of heteronormative norms and the violent suppression of nonnormative sexualities, including caste-transgressive heteronormative desire. The *Manusmriti* is a case in point. There has never been a time, including the Vedic age, that was not pervaded with conflict, war, and violence (Singh 2017, 22), a brahminic violence toward non-brahminic Others. In other words, these exuberant claims about the glorious Indian past with its queer utopias begin to crumble when one scrutinizes it from the perspective of caste. Such selective formulations of the past exacerbate inequality because they ignore the anti-desire and anti-Dalit aspects of caste. Not only do queer (brahminic) theorists seem to focus solely on upper-caste Indians, they use Western queer theory in pro-brahminic ways.

Let me illustrate this with an example of a recently published book entitled *Queeristan* (2020) by scholar and entrepreneur Parmesh Shahani. Whereas Shahani archives queer issues and key moments in LGBTQ+ struggles in present-day India, he predominantly engages with the lives of people like himself—middle and upper-middle classes, upper-caste, westernized, and

city-dwelling, which excludes the vast majority of Indians. *Queeristan* seemingly traces the LGBTQ movement in India, but its thematics focus on the role that corporate India is playing concerning queer issues and rights. Almost everyone who is mentioned in the book by name—lawyers, writers, activists, historians, and people working in corporate sectors—is upper-caste, English-speaking, and urban. Thus the India that emerges is only the atomized version of India whose problems the book claims to address. This privileged India seems unconnected to the real India. Shahani, just out of college in the United States, recounts how he got his corporate job in India: "On a cold spring night after the Microsoft interview, I was having dinner with Anand and Anuradha Mahindra in Cambridge. […] If I returned to India, Anand told me, the Mahindra group would be happy to hire me" (2020, 8). While the nature of his hiring is less surprising, it is astonishing how casually he is offered rights. When Shahini asks Anand whether his same-sex American partner would be offered spousal benefits if he relocates to India, he is assured that "he wouldn't be treated any differently from the other employees." Commenting on his work in Mumbai, Shahini writes: "My next idea was to create a new kind of cultural place in India. The idea found its home at Godrej, and I found my feet, ready to begin a new inning as the founder of the Godrej India Culture Lab—to change the face of contemporary India" (11). How he describes his work is indeed commendable but the Godrej group is not India. Several chapters' titles in the book, such as "LGBTQ Inclusion Can Make You Money,'' indicate how alien the corporate world appears in the broader socio-cultural context of India. After depicting this urban utopia and its struggles and achievements, in the concluding chapter "Queeristan: Other Worlds Are Possible" (251). Shahini revisits the landmark victories of queer groups in India, which makes pleasant reading but creates a queer utopian space which, on the ground, bars the non-elite groups—that is the majority of Indian queer populace. His focus on this tiny urban upper-caste section of the Indian populace pinpoints whose lives, concerns, and aspirations matter.

In a lengthy book, Shahani hardly touches on the question of caste. Although he talks about Dalit poet Dhiren Borsia's anti-caste politics in urban queer culture (31), Borsia, for all practical purposes, is as privileged as Shahani. *Queeristan* talks about the idea of intersectionality in the context of India without first taking caste into account. A society that practices untouchability and incorporates horizontally assigned hierarchies of inequality in its social fabric can hardly imagine or allow the kinds of intersections that the theory of intersectionality proposes. I argue that societies that use intersectionality as an effective theoretical tool in order to be more inclusive already assume connections and equalities between people that are strikingly absent in a society hinged on caste. In the Indian context, intersectionality can only work in the kind of urban, middle and upper-middle class, and upper-caste milieu that Shahani deals with, giving an expansive account of

the Indian gay movement that assumes India to be only upper caste. Simply put, intersectionality is incompatible with caste because intersections assume 'touch.' Ontologically, in a brahminic context transactions, crossovers, interactions, collaborations, and thus intersections that occur remain within the domain of touchable caste,[5] a key feature of caste that is also reflected in Shahani's book.

Whether in Shahani's book or in the works of the postcolonial or queer theorists who engage with texts from ancient, medieval, and modern periods, Untouchables or the issue of untouchabilty rarely appears. Shahani's erasure of Dalits has a long history in India. When queer scholars refer to a text like the *Kamasutra* to underscore India's tolerance or even celebration of diverse sexualities, they ignore that *Kamasutra's* socio-cultural milieu is upper-caste. Its protagonist is always a *nagarika*, or citizen, an upper-caste male figure from the elite with a cosmopolitan outlook who seeks pleasure and enjoys life in ways that cannot be equated with the lives of ordinary people (Doniger 2007, 71-73).[6] This figure of the nagarika, if it shows anything, shows gross caste inequalities. Also, the nagarika's hedonistic lifestyle must be an exception rather than a norm, otherwise brahminic caste purity could not have been maintained. Just as the nagarika of the *Kamasutra* engages with the upper-caste elite, Shahani's book, in a parallel way, concerns the lives of upper-caste Indians. Ordinary people in a pre-modern age resemble the common man in present-day India in that they are compelled to live in caste-appropriate ways. This perspective is also reflective of how a certain section of the elite in different epochs creates non-normative spaces for itself without giving up caste order. Shahani's claim that he records and reflects upon queer lives in India as a whole is hardly tenable.

By reading contemporary texts against the backdrop of ancient texts such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, this thesis argues that the brahminic intolerance toward non-brahminic others has its roots in a culture that goes back to the Vedic period. My aim is not to dismiss Hinduism, nor individual Brahmins or brahminic contribution to Indian philosophy and various Indian art forms that are shaped by Vedic knowledge systems **(**Varma 2021, 2020, 2018). However, I do question

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[5] We will see how upper-caste characters in Narayan's and Roy's novels exhaust the very idea of any humane interaction with outcasts because all Brahmin-Dalit interactions are hinged on the practice of untouchability. Commenting on the failure of communism (and also democracy) in India, Roy points out that upper-caste communists have learned their principles from "The Book [...] written by a German Jew" in Europe (Roy 2014, 114) but without considering caste. Also, Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" uses the word caste only three times, in each case as an empty word. The essay locates the idea of "subaltern" in the context of colonialism with examples from Indian life in a way that collapses Brahmin-Dalit categories but offers a powerful critique of colonialism in India. Commenting on Foucault's work, Spivak notes he uses the history of the clinic, the asylum, the prison, and the university in ways that "foreclose a reading of the broader narratives of imperialism" ([1985]1994, 86). But Spivak's own essay, although it discusses the practice of sati and traces its genealogy to brahminic texts, keeps the domain of "subalternity" upper caste.

[6] Ruth Vanita compares the Western intellectual elites with their Indian counterparts, and by default, her essay highlights the brahminic nature of the Indian elite in both modern and premodern India (see Vanita 2004, 119–135; 2002a, 95-110).

Brahminism and the complex ways in which upper castes institute brahminic structures that harm and impede many millions of people. I examine texts written by major upper-caste authors to study caste's interface with sexuality in all its complexity, but I have not extensively used any contemporary texts by writers who identify themselves as queer or Dalit writers. Gay novels and memoirs, mainly an urban phenomenon, often erase caste as they predominately reflect cosmopolitan lives and concerns, whereas hijra and Dalit narratives are so much focused on violence and humiliation that they become exotic. Thus both gay and hijra/Dalit narratives seem to occur outside mainstream brahminic culture. Therefore, I focus on mainstream texts to examine how caste and queer sexuality operate in brahminic culture. I chose the novel because, unlike any other genre, it takes us into the inner realms of characters' consciousnesses, how they interact, how they are culturally constituted, how they come to see themselves as Brahmins and Dalits in everyday practice. I am also aware that novels written by brahminic authors can yield a fuller picture if I read them in conjunction with sources such as newspaper articles, YouTube interviews, blogs, and works by Dalit and queer activists and writers. In my close reading of the characters, while I recognize that they are made of words, I also consider them ontological hybrids, as text-person combinations, or to use John Frow's words, at once "person like entities" and "pieces of writing and imaging" (2014, 23). Language, but also the author or self, and the world go into the making of literary characters (Anderson, Felski, and Moi 2019; Smith 2018, xi). Concerning this thesis, I also want to emphasize another point: When it comes to the study of the caste system, scholars tend to study only the victims. Conversely, my focus is not so much on the victims of caste as on its apparent beneficiaries—which is to say, I analyze the impact of Brahminism on upper-caste people. In most cases, a Brahmin is not studied in the same way as a Dalit. In other words, most have studied the impact of untouchability only on the Dalits, not on the Brahmins.

To elaborate further on the need for such a focus on Brahmins, I want to emphasize that social and legal discourse on violence in practice is frequently tainted by the epistemology of caste, which means that gender or caste-based violence is judged, analyzed, or studied with a brahminic bias that places the burden of violence on the victim, but absolves the perpetrator—a framework that the *Manusmriti* explicitly upholds. This epistemological tendency of caste shapes social or legal discourse, focusing disproportionately on the impact of violence on Dalits, women, sexual minorities, and non-brahminic others while ignoring the structural, conceptual, implicit and open violence committed by the members of brahminic castes. Rather than turning to minority Dalit or queer subcultures, I examine mainstream brahminic texts, and thus the upper-caste culture that produces outcasts. However, when necessary, I also have referred to texts, other than the novel**,** that deal with queer and caste issues. To understand the brahminic obsession with caste and sexuality, I

turn to the works of Arundhati Roy, V. S. Naipaul, and R. K. Narayan. Since M. K. Gandhi seems to have combined Vedic culture with his Western education and experience and thus seems to embody pre-modern and contemporary India and its contradictions, he appears throughout this thesis.

I use the terms brahminic and (upper)caste synonymously, but I make a distinction between Brahman and Brahmin in chapter II. Also when I use the word brahminic, I am referring to upper castes as well as other castes that fall in the domain of the Indian caste system, and thus are touchable. I also must point out that the members of the servant caste, unlike Untouchables, are placed in the domain of touchable castes. In addition, my references to upper or brahminic castes also include members of religions such as Islam and Christianity because culturally they all practice caste. I mostly use the term 'Untouchable' when I am referring to caste in its epistemological sense, and Dalit when I refer to Dalit activists or Dalit activism in contemporary India. While both brahminic and Dalit writers generally prefer the word 'Dalit' and shun the word 'Untouchable,' I find both these words problematic as they equally humiliate those who use them and those against whom these words are used (except when Dalits use either of these words to describe themselves, because, in doing so, they refuse to be limited by caste). English terms used in legal discourse in India such as general castes for brahminic castes and scheduled castes and scheduled tribes for Dalits and other marginalized non-brahminic people seem benign as they do not carry the burden of the history of Dalit humiliation. Using these secular terms in this thesis will amount to erasing caste as it is practiced and lived in everyday life. However, when I refer to words such as Brahmin, Untouchable, and Dalit, I am only describing caste-based identities and not making any value judgment, be they a Dalit or a Brahmin. Throughout my thesis, I italicize all foreign words on their first appearance and explain their meaning and with regard to in-text referencing, I cite paragraph numbers wherever page numbers are not available.

Examining a range of sources with a primary focus on literary texts, chapter II highlights the hidden yet pervasive role that caste plays. Investigating such diverse writers as M. K. Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, Saddat Hassan Manto, Ismat Chugtai, R. K. Narayan, V. S. Naipaul, Arundhati Roy, and others, I demonstrate how brahminic, anti-brahminic, and seemingly abrahminic writers, despite their radically different viewpoints and politics, reinforce and refashion caste.

Chapter III examines R. K. Narayan's novel *The English Teacher* whose milieu is ultra brahminic. The novel recalls how brahminic tropes that I have discussed in the previous chapter recur in Narayan's novel. Its dutiful hero, with shades of Gandhi's asceticism and altruism, shines as a Rama-like figure from the epic poem *Ramayana.* While Narayan intends to present an ideal brahminic family, the text reveals a Brahmin man trapped in a heterosexual marriage, negotiating between his brahminic privilege, same-sex desire, and caste order, thus evoking Gandhi's queerness

and his dysfunctional marriage with Kasturba. I conclude the chapter by showing the loneliness of its central Brahmin character who, as a queer person, remains firmly trapped and limited by a caste order he was complicit in perpetuating to the disadvantage of others.

Chapter IV analyzes Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things.* Unlike the family in Narayan's novel, Roy presents a brahminic family that is queer in multiple ways. As an anti-brahminic novel, it does not evoke Gandhi or Rama-like figures. Rather, an Untouchable figure emerges as the novel's central character who makes love to an upper-caste woman and thereby transgresses caste norms. An anglicized and seemingly progressive family unleashes its fury when caste order is threatened and colludes with the local police to punish the transgressive lovers. Below the surface of Western education and a purportedly casteless religion like Christianity, Roy's upper-caste characters display their deep-seated brahminic propensities.

Having examined the dynamic of caste in two very different brahminic families in chapters III and IV, chapter V discusses how in Roy's fiction everyday "things" constitute caste and by implication influence sexuality and how brahminic negotiations with things do not necessarily benefit the brahminic class. Although one associates India with spiritualism, yoga, meditation, asceticism, nonviolence, and figures like Gautama Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi, these associations, I argue, hide its material underpinnings. In the Hindu conception of life, an ideal life has four stages of which the second stage, called the *grihastha ashram*, or householder stage, must be devoted to the pursuit of wealth and material well-being. Simply put, a*rtha* (aggressive engagement with the material world) is central to Hinduism. Reflecting on characters' approach toward human others and things in the context of caste and relationality, I demonstrate that their relationships are anything but positively relational.

After this discussion of caste in the context of brahminic families and material things, chapter VI considers immaterial things such as language, with a particular focus on caste and English language politics in contemporary India. I argue that brahminic castes have used languages such as Sanskrit to strengthen their caste hegemony. In India's modern history, it is through the appropriation of the English language that upper-caste people have sought to retain and perpetuate their caste hegemony. The language is used like a brahminic ritual to maintain class and caste differences between upper-caste and lower-caste populations. I show that English language politics and modernity superimpose themselves on the already existing caste hierarchies in pro-brahminic ways. And when the interface of the English language and caste occasionally has a positive influence on sexual and human rights movements, this effect predominantly works in favor of upper-caste Indians.

Following the discussion on brahminic families and their lives, and the various ways—both material and immaterial—through which they establish themselves as privileged, the book's penultimate chapter VII focuses on city spaces as they emerge in Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness.* These spaces surface in ways that queer the certainties of brahminic homes that appeared in previous chapters. I discuss how caste produces outcasts to perpetuate itself, how brahminic discourse powers the production of Untouchables and thus Brahmins. Hindu religious concepts such as karma, daan, shubh, and ashubh establish the hierarchies of low and high or Dalit and Brahmin. In addition to marking permanently some communities as untouchable, brahminic communities expel from their midst all those people who defy, or cannot follow, the edicts of caste. I claim that certain subcultures such as hijra, or similarly courtesan, sadhu, and Dalit exist in India because of the Indian caste system. The chapter concludes by showing that while members of these subcultures to some extent create safe spaces for themselves, a real change requires the participation of both dominant and marginalized communities to reform caste society.

In my concluding chapter, by examining two recent incidents—actor Sushant Singh Rajput's suicide and the impact of Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns on impoverished Indian communities such as 'migrant' workers, I show how these two events support the central claims of my thesis. By discussing these two incidents in the context of my overall thesis, I demonstrate how the damaging aspects of caste and caste's interface with sexuality leak into various spheres of everyday life that may seem unconnected to caste, thus revealing the social mechanics of the caste system.

II

Brahminism: An Old Equilibrium

The terms ‘Brahman’ and ‘Brahmin’ are not equivalent. While Brahman is a metaphysical concept in Hinduism, a Brahmin is a socially constructed figure. As a concept Brahman is central to Hindu religion and philosophy; it permeates a range of Hindu religious concepts such as karma, maya, dharma, and Purusha-Prakriti, which lend themselves to the practice of caste and prepare the ground for Brahmins to appear. Before I delve deeper into Brahmins and Brahminism, I would like to make some remarks on the concept of Brahman to show how it is linked to the formation of Brahmins and Brahminism, that is, the Indian caste system. I also show how by appropriating and claiming to embody Brahman, Brahmins transform a metaphysical entity Brahman into a sociological one.

Etymologically, the term Brahman means the Supreme reality. Although the word Brahman appears repeatedly in the Vedas and the Upanishads,[7] it escapes analysis since it is everything and nothing, supreme reality and supreme void, indeterminable and self-determining. The Upanishads view Brahman as eternal, conscious, irreducible, infinite. All living beings are its manifestations, and yet it is stressed that Brahman is not God as it does not refer to the anthropomorphic concept of God of the Abrahamic religions. Another concept closely related to Brahman is Atman, which in its essence is an atomized form of Brahman. “I am manifested in the world of life as an eternal portion of myself in individualized form” or “I am one, I shall become many, and be manifested” (see note 10 in Chaudhari 1954, 50), says Brahman—the Supreme reality. In the *Upaniṣads*, some texts posit that Brahman is identical with Atman, others that Atman is a part of Brahman (Deussen [1906] 1966, 86–111, 182–212). Brahman is Atman when embodied within a particular individual entity (Höchsmann 2016, 71-86). While Brahman is universal and Atman is individual, both manifest the cosmic principle. Like Brahman, Atman is nondual; it is not the ego, the mind, the unconscious psyche, or the empirical self-conceived as a flux of consciousness; it transcends all empirically

[7] The word Brahman first appeared in *Rig Veda* (c. 1500-1200 BCE), but it was conceptualized as a cosmic principle in Atharva-Veda Samhita (c. 1200-1000 BCE). Only in *Rig Veda* was the word Brahman mentioned well over a hundred times (see Griffith’s 1896 English translation). See also Olivelle (1998, 656).

discernible categories, limitations, and dualities. In *The Early Upanisads,* Patrick Olivelle translates Atman thus:

> *sa eṣa neti nety ātmā | agṛhyo na hi gṛhyate | aśīryo na hi śīryate | asaṅgo na sajyate | asito na vyathate | na riṣyati.*" About this self (ātman), one can only say 'not–, not—.' He is ungraspable, for he cannot be grasped. He is undecaying, for he is not subject to decay. He has nothing sticking to him, for he does not stick to anything. He is not bound; yet he neither trembles in fear nor suffers injury … . (1998, 101, ellipsis in original)[8]

Olivelle's definition of Atman applies equally to Brahman, except that the quotation in Sanskrit does not assign gender to the concepts of Atman or Brahman**.**

The concept of Brahman in Hindu thought takes on caste meanings as it moves from its philosophical and religious domain to the domain of the everyday**.** Conceptually all living beings are atomized versions of Brahman and seek to merge with Brahman, the Supreme reality, to attain perfect and eternal bliss called *Brahma-sthiti.* Yet it is assumed that humans are closer to attaining Brahma-sthiti (Taittiriya Upanishad 1921, 86, 99*)* compared to animals, which leads to a further assumption that some humans are more suitable than others in embodying Brahman. Through such formulations, the attempt to privilege the human with regard to Brahman gives rise to hierarchies of high and low, touchable and untouchable human beings. In the *Rig Veda*, the Purusa hymn conceptualizes the human body in its four constituents: Brahman (mouth), Rajanya (arms), Vaisya (thighs), and Shudra (feet) in the image of self-sustaining Brahman. These four bodily constituents signify wise thinking, wise ruling, wise work, and wise cleaning. The Purusa hymn describes and frames every single human body as a manifestation of Brahman, which means that every one has Brahman, Rajanya, Vaisya, and Shudra within oneself and that it is one's dharma[9] to take care of their bodily equivalents so that one is in complete harmony with Brahman. In his article "The concept of Brahman in Hindu Philosophy," Haridas Chaudhari, a Vedic scholar, writes, "One can realize Brahman by being one with Brahman. The vision of Brahman is in the nature of supersensuous and supra-rational immediate experience born of the complete integration of personality" (1954, 48). When Brahman, Rajanya, Vaisya, and Shudra are in sync, one attains Brahma-sthiti.

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[8] Throughout this thesis, all unbracketed ellipses are ellipses in original.

[9] The epistemology of dharma (how do we know the right dharma?) is arguably pro-brahminic, but the later brahminic literature has firmly established dharma as a pro-brahminic doctrine using the authority of a special group of people, mainly upper caste, called the *siesta* or cultured elites (Olivelle 2016, 56). See also Deshpande (1993; 2009).

However, such a stunning conception of the body in Vedic texts takes a radically different meaning in post-Vedic texts where those who expound on these texts assign a single body's constituents to different sections of people, thus categorizing them as Brahmin (priests), Rajanya (warriors), Vaisya (merchants), and Shudra (servants). By manipulating Vedic notions of Brahman, Brahmins assign themselves superior status and impose an inferior status on Shudras. The transference of the theory of Brahman from a human body to a social body can be understood as a positive move if at a societal level Brahman, Rajanya, Vaisya, and Shudra cooperate as they do in the human body, without devolving into high and low categories.[10] However, since the gradation occurs and assumes a violent form toward all those not placed in Brahman, Rajanya, Vaisya, and Shudra categories**,** the concept of Brahman and its manifestation in a single human body, when applied to the social body, ushers in the notion of Brahmins and Untouchables—that is, it introduces the caste system into society. When people call themselves Brahmin, they effectively separate people into upper- and lower-caste categories.

Since the process of becoming and remaining Brahmins continues in India, I am interested in how, without giving up the practice of untouchability, the (upper-caste**)** Indian nation claims to be democratic. Drawing upon Indian writings in English, some key episodes from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* and their relevance in everyday life, I will discuss how Brahminism is constituted, practiced, and challenged in present-day India. Caught between brahminic and anti-brahminic confrontations are abrahminic voices that seem to neither embrace nor reject caste. Even if caste shapes these 'abrahminic' voices, it is challenging to recognize how. In this chapter, I place Indian writers into three categories; brahminic, anti-brahminic, and abrahminic. Whereas M. K. Gandhi (1869-1948), R. K. Narayan (1906-2001), and V. S. Naipaul (1932-2018) seem to have a distinctly brahminic approach, writers such as Arundhati Roy (b.1961), B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), and Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) are anti-brahminic at the outset. The third category of writers that evades easy categorization includes mainly Ismat Chugtai (1915-1991) and Saddat Hassan Manto (1912-1955). As I study these diverse authors, I am mainly interested in the caste dimension of their work.

In India's post-globalized phase, it was hoped that caste would lose its hold and disappear. These hopes have only partially come true. Global processes and media technologies have simultaneously weakened and strengthened caste (Dhillon 2016, paras. 2-4, 12; Nayar 2011, 69-74; Thirumal and Tartakov 2011, 20-39). By forming exclusive caste-based groups on online platforms

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[10] Ambedkar (1946, 30) points out how a secular concept of Purusha in the *Rig Veda* took a radically different meaning in later texts, division of work leading to the division of workers into "fixed and permanent occupational categories," a move that Ambedkar calls "a perversity."

such as Facebook, brahminic communities reproduce caste with full force in the online world. A vast majority of upper-caste Hindus (93 percent) do not accept friend requests from Dalits (Singh 2018, 269). The images that are shared, circulated, and consumed reinstate Brahminism by transposing its ideology to the online world. Even before globalization and digitalization, whenever native reformers or external forces sought to abolish caste, caste held its ground. Commenting on this peculiar persistence of caste, Arundhati Roy said that while she knew of the existence of caste, she was unaware of its brutal power over Dalits until she read Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*: "When I first read it I felt as though somebody had walked me into a dim room and opened the windows" (Roy 2014, 17). If caste can be concealed from educated Indians like Roy, it can easily be hidden from millions of others who have no access to education, and therefore, are not equipped to understand its complexities**,** let alone to challenge it. Since caste is profoundly enmeshed with religious rituals, no one questions it or links it to the everyday practice of performing caste rituals that reinforce untouchability and perpetuates Brahminism.

Whereas anti-brahminic writers such as Roy and Ambedkar contest Brahminism, brahminic writers such as Gandhi, Narayan, and Naipaul seem to nurture caste—not only by aligning with it but by upholding it. But can the creation of a caste-based social order be considered a triumph? Or does such a triumph innately herald its failure? These questions emerge because Brahminism, no matter how benign, establishes itself by violently constructing non-brahminic others such as Dalits. Writers such as Manto and Chugtai, who are neither brahminic nor anti-brahminic, are intriguing because their works complicate conversations surrounding caste. They seem to have a neutral, less pontificating, approach to caste. Since these writers do not take extreme positions, they give a more nuanced portrayal of caste. One has to dig deeper to read caste in their seemingly neutral works. Can they transcend the caste structure on which the social order hinges.

1. Brahmins at Work: Gandhi's Appetite, Narayan's Malgudi, and Naipaul's Gaze

In brahminic narratives, Gandhi is framed as a 'mahatma,' or saint, and while anything that enhances Gandhi's mahatmahood is welcomed by the brahminic establishment**,** any question or gesture that weakens even slightly Gandhi's pro-brahminic image is disavowed. However, it is only through asides that one hears of aspects about Gandhi that brahminic narratives conceal. Before Gandhi became a mahatma, he was a boy, a student at Oxford, and a teenage husband. It is these early and lesser-known phases of Gandhi's life that interest me. Reading Gandhi as a socio-cultural text may illuminate brahminic communities' complicated relationship with caste and sexuality. Examining Gandhi's early formative years and the pre-mahatma stage of his life—that is, the time before the queerness of his youth and his seemingly staged adulthood settled into brahminic

certainty—, I seek to examine the queer aspects of Gandhi's life in the context of caste, Gandhi's politics, and Gandhian discourse. The intention is not to 'out' him but rather to study how, without giving up Brahminism, he juggled caste and sexuality.

I am interested in the early phase of Gandhi's life because, unlike this phase, Gandhi himself and his upper-caste followers archived every other phase of his life in minute detail. Shahid Amin's statement seems only partially true when he points out that Gandhi was "not as he really was, but as they [the people] had thought him up, and it allowed for myths to circulate around him" (Amin 1996, 173-174). The carefully cultivated figure of Gandhi was a joint venture in which Gandhi and his upper-caste followers participated. Working from within the confines of caste norms and also constantly evaluating them, Gandhi never discarded caste. By becoming a Rama-like figure, a fakir, an androgynous figure, a Londoner, a beef eater, a politician, a writer, a callous husband, a martyr, and father of the nation all in one life, he emerged as a quintessentially queer figure, offering so many bewildering facets of his life that he obscures the 'real' Gandhi. In her essay "The Doctor and the Saint," Roy writes:

> Gandhi's life and his writing—48,000 pages bound into ninety-eight volumes of collected works— have been disaggregated and carried off, event by event, sentence by sentence, until no coherent narrative remains, if indeed there ever was one. The trouble is that Gandhi actually said everything and its opposite. (2014, 40)

Despite Gandhi's contradictions, his politics indicate his brahminic leanings. More than Gandhi's voluminous writings, it was his symbolic acts that stayed in public memory. He became a symbol and a visual image that lent a dynamic impetus to Brahminism, but it took him a lifetime to emerge as a persuasive agent of the refashioning of Brahminism. The way Gandhi took decisions concerning his family, community and nation, how he prioritized his political goals, and the way his brahminic followers analyzed and read him, all ultimately served to support Brahminism. When one studies Gandhi's life from a caste perspective, Gandhi's ostensibly secular and rational approach is, at its core, entwined with Brahminism. However, before Gandhi became such a formidable, brahminic figure, the obscured Gandhi of Gandhi's youth and adulthood had to fight several personal battles with his family, caste community, and beyond. The accepted narrative about Gandhi is that he grew up in a wealthy Baniya family. After finishing school, he obtained a law degree in England and then went to South Africa to work where, on June 7, 1893, he was famously thrown out of the white-only compartment of a train by two English policemen, and thus was hit hard by the reality of the Empire (see chapters: 33, 34, 35 in Gandhi 1927) that made him particularly

sensitive toward the marginalized. Enriched with these varied experiences, Gandhi returned to India, became mahatma in his own lifetime, and eventually was killed by a Maharashtrian Brahmin, Nathuram Godse.[11] However, there is more to Gandhi's life than this dominant narrative allows.

Although Gandhi had a protected upbringing, with a doting mother and amiable siblings, his life was unpleasant outside the home, especially at school.[12] He said little about this early phase of his life. Only in retrospect did Gandhi write about his school days and his encounter with the English language during this period: "I used to be very shy and avoided all company. My books and my lessons were my sole companions. […] I could not bear to talk to anybody. I was even afraid lest anyone should poke fun at me" (Gandhi 1927, 22). He began to learn English voluntarily in his teens, already feeling its power because others would not know the "exciting" things he was reading. His conservative family was not overly enthusiastic about an English education, as they wanted him to join the family business. However, Gandhi had other ideas that perhaps came to him via the English language. Now there is no way of ascertaining what exactly Gandhi read in that early period of his life that may have fired his imagination to the extent that he wanted to abandon his home for an unfamiliar England.[13] His family opposed his plan, but Gandhi persisted with it. In those days, young people from India, even from wealthy families, rarely ventured abroad to study. Those who did were the exceptions. Since Hindu dharma Shastras (law books) forbade taking a voyage by sea (Manu [n.d.] 1991, 3: 158), one could be ousted from the community for disregarding such religious edicts**.** Gandhi faced serious opposition from his extended family and

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[11] Nathuram Godse (1910-1949) was a Brahmin who, like Gandhi, seemed to have struggled with his sexuality. Godse's parents lost three male babies soon after they were born, but when a girl child was born she survived. The parents thought that there was a curse on the family. So, when they had a fourth male baby, they raised him as a girl. He was made to wear a *nath* (nose-ring), and his name was changed from Ramchandra to Nathuram (the Ram who wore a nose-ring). He grew into a "strapping" young man but he never married and "shied away from the company of women" (Malgonkar [2008] 2015, 77). However, unlike Gandhi, he turned into a Hindu extremist. Ashis Nandy mentioned queer aspects of Godse's sexuality to understand his Hindutva politics which bordered on fascism (1980, 70-93). While Nandy did not study Godse's life history in the context of caste, I argue that caste played a crucial role in (mis)shaping them.

[12] In *A Writer's People* (2007), Naipaul briefly mentions Gandhi's unpleasant experience at college in India, but there is little about Gandhi's early years (97-98). At school, Gandhi was aloof and feared other children (Adams 2011, 10), but at home he was "restless" and "full of curiosity" (Erikson 1969, 108). In contrast to the other well-documented stages of his life, Gandhi wrote about his childhood and early adolescence. Gandhi's biographers mainly relied on his autobiography to describe his early life.

[13] We can never ascertain what made Gandhi leave his hometown except for what Gandhi wrote in his autobiography. The latter-day writers relied heavily on this work and repeated what Gandhi wrote about his teenage years. For his secondary education, Gandhi went to Alfred High School and Samaldas Arts College in his region, both founded by the British. It is often stressed that Gandhi's family and his relatives were conservative, blurring the fact that there were lawyers, business people, and administrators in Gandhi's family circle who were in direct contact with the British officials. All this access and privilege and the young Gandhi's own efforts most likely shaped his ambition to leave his homeland.

caste community, but he did not surrender to their demands (see chapters 11 and 12 in Gandhi 1927; Naipaul 2007, 99). Whatever English books Gandhi read, their ideas encouraged him to stand up to his conservative family and community and remain steadfast in his resolve to study abroad. Implicit in Gandhi's intense desire to experience London was his dissatisfaction with life at home—a need that he felt only a journey to England could fulfill. His quest seemed to fall in the domain of unspeakable desire. Before he left for England, Gandhi was forced to get married, and he acquiesced because it afforded him the much needed-freedom from his conservative family. However, Gandhi's mother extracted a promise from him that he would not touch "wine, women, and meat" (Gandhi 1927, 97). Nevertheless, once in England, he embraced meat and wine. With regard to women, however, his interest seemed to lie elsewhere.

In the early period of his stay in London, Gandhi showed a great appetite for indulging in pleasure. He wore modern clothes, learned to play the piano, danced, and ate beef (Naipaul 2007, 101-102). The London of 1888-1891, with its vibrant underground culture, must have stimulated the young boy from Rajkot—Gandhi's hometown. The "thrilling," "secretive" things he had furtively read about in English books earlier in India were now engulfing him. In *Gandhi and his Apostles,* Ved Mehta writes about Gandhi's student days thus:

> To be an Indian student in London in the late Victorian period was to move on the fringes of English society, not just among vegetarians and birth-control advocates but also among a variety of cranks, radicals, obscurantists, and romantics who subscribed to many ideologies born of the Darwinian and Marxist revolutions: anarchism, feminism, Fabianism, atheism. For instance, it is known that Gandhi came across people who […] organized their own utopian communities, willingly walking miles from one to another in order to discuss their ideas over a cup of tea. (1977, 91)

The 19-year-old Gandhi not only engaged with eccentric people and their non-normative ideologies, but he went on to live with Dr. Josiah Oldfield (1863-1953),[14] who "was the only Englishman with whom young Gandhi lived on the basis of friendship and equality and the relationship was to be an enduring one" (cited in Sanghavi [2006](2008), 61). Brahminic narratives seldom mention Gandhi's friendship with the lifelong bachelor Dr. Oldfield. When this friendship is mentioned it is given a

[14] Gandhi and Oldfield lived together like "two vegetarian bachelor 'brothers' " (Wolpert 2001, 22) at 52 St. Stephen's Gardens, Bayswater, in a house overlooking a shady park (Guha 2013, n.p.). Later, Oldfield went on to live in India where he worked as a physician for the Maharaja of Bhavnagar, presumably on "Gandhi's recommendation" (Tridip 2021, para. 4). Although Gandhi had become an iconic figure, they frequently met each other (Oldfield 1951, 189).

pro-brahminic spin. Dr. Oldfield recalls Gandhi thus, "We lived in the same diggings, shared the same table, sat on the same committees, wrestled with the same social problems and were faced with the same temptations of youth" (Hay 1989, 91). Gandhi seemed to have searched in diverse ways to quench the "temptations of his youth."

Gandhi's well-documented obsession with food gives clues to his sexuality and his pro-brahminic caste politics. His hunt for a specific food on the streets of London to satisfy his hunger and his unusual male friendships not only signal his queer sexuality, it mirrors the present-day modalities of queer men and women's life journeys toward cities.[15] In the same period while Gandhi was in London, Aurbindo Ghosh (1872-1850) and his brother Manmohan Ghosh (1869-1924), two would-be prominent Indians, were also studying in London. Gandhi might have sought compatriots in the Ghosh brothers. At this time, Oscar Wilde was a well-known socialite in the city. Wilde knew Manmohan well. Once he described Manmohan as "A young Indian panther in evening brown" (quoted in Ganguly 2003, 22). Gandhi might not have known Wilde directly but, being a law student, he must have been familiar with Wilde and Wildean provocations[16] and London's underground gay subcultures (Cook 2000, 59-90). Sachidananda Sinha, an Indian student, who saw Gandhi at Piccadilly Circus in February 1990 described him thus:

> He was wearing a high silk top hat burnished bright, a Gladstonian collar, stiff and starched, a rather flashy tie displaying all the colours of the rainbow under which there was a fine striped silk shirt. […] He carried leather gloves and a silver-mounted stick, but wore no spectacles. He was, to use the contemporary slang, a nut, a masher, a blood [a dandy]— a student more interested in fashion frivolities than in his studies. (quoted in Nanda 1958, 28)

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[15] Outside spaces such as the bazaar or modern city, as opposed to familiar spaces such as the village, blur caste divisions and increase the chances of accidental pollution (Chakrabarty 1992). Modern cities emerge as ambiguous spaces where all distinctions of caste or even sex seem to lose their edge, and thus a new space opens up that threatens the social system based on caste notions of touchable and untouchable, sacred and profane. London, as opposed to Gandhi's native town Rajkot, freed him from the confines of caste, allowing him room for daydreaming (and cruising) and getting lost. Walter Benjamin writes about modern cities in a way that suggests their queer potentials. The modern city offers too many "possibilities, positions, intersections, passages, detours" (quoted in Sontag 1981, 117)— presenting "an entrance to the maze" (113), leading to a space where many kinds of lives are possible, including the "forbidden." In the Indian context, these features make the city an anti-caste space. See Benjamin (1979, 293-241) and Canetti **(**1960**,** 15-16) for a more detailed discussion on the "possibilities" that modern cities offer. See also Ruth Vanita's 2013b essay in which she demonstrates that gay men and women tend to go to foreign places because of their sexuality, citing several writers and poets from India and other countries.

[16] During his student years in England (1888-1891), Gandhi spent a daily hour immersed in the *Daily Telegraph* and *Pall Mall Gazette.* He followed the debates surrounding Oscar Wilde and would have come across names like Walter Pater and John Ruskin. The latter was a frequent contributor and Gandhi was greatly influenced by his thinking (Adams 2011, 85-86). He also read and admired Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), see in Adams (2011, 31).

Gandhi was enjoying England, oblivious to his young wife living with his parents in India.

Although Gandhi's writings give the impression that his experience in England was fruitful. It could not have been a smooth ride for a dark-skinned person in London during that time. The turning point came in Gandhi's life when he was thrown off a white-only carriage on a train in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Both India and England, albeit in different ways, were limiting him: One wanted Gandhi to follow caste; the other wanted to punish him for his skin color. However, both static India and fast-changing England could not discourage Gandhi. Instead, these two diverse societies seemed to have expanded Gandhi's sympathies to the problems of the world rather than simply focusing on his personal difficulties. Gandhi was not distancing himself from the depressing aspects of the world, he was preparing to deal with its contingencies. Not long before going to London, he compromised with the rigid Indian caste norms and was now prepared to deal with the other world that was trying to compromise his racial freedom. In addition, the world at that time was changing at a very fast pace and, despite its temptations, London might have tempered Gandhi's initial excitement for the city. Victorian England was increasingly turning hostile toward queers.[17] Oscar Wilde paid for his homosexuality with his life. I suggest that all of these events imbued Gandhi with a pragmatic realism about the world. Gandhi gave up the idea of pursuing desire because the two societies he had known were hostile to it, albeit in different ways.

Gandhi focused his energies on working for the less privileged and for the greater good of others, but his sympathies grew in a way that only strengthened brahminic order which required the continued subjugation of women and Untouchables. Gandhi's sympathies for others did not extend to his wife, Kasturba**.** Despite his growing reputation as a public man, the private Gandhi was violent. Kasturba had to fight tough battles with Gandhi, the husband.[18] With regard to food, clothes, children's education, and matters of desire, Gandhi dominated her.[19] While Gandhi was

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[17] Gandhi was in England from 1888 to 1891. During this time, and also later on, newspapers such the *Daily Chronicle*, the *Evening News*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, *Reynolds*, the *Star*, and the *Telegraph* wrote extensively about homosexuals. Magazines, pamphlets, book chapters, court proceedings, and medical journals also played a part in presenting sexual minorities as criminals. Some of this is evidenced in titles reported by the press: (a) "Lord Euston's Case." *Reynolds.* January 9, 1890, 4. (b) "Euston Libel Case: A Witness for the Defence Tells a Sensational Story." *Star*. January 16, 1890, 3. (c) "Fitzroy Street Raid." *Star.* August 20, 1890, 3. (d) "Fitzroy Street Raid." *Star.* August 20, 1890, 3. (e) "Labouchere, Henry." *Truth*. November 28, 1889; March 6, 1890; April 11, 1895; March 6, 1890. (f) "Police Raid in Fitzroy Square: 20 Persons Arrested." *Globe.* August 13, 1894, 7. (g) "The Scandals." *Star.* January 8, 1890, 3. (h) "The West End Scandals: Names of Some of the Distinguished Criminals Who Have Escaped." *North London Press*. November 16, 1889, 5.

[18] Arun Gandhi's (Gandhi's grandson) book provides an expansive picture of Kasturba's difficult life with Gandhi. Soon after the teenage bride comes to live with Gandhi's family, she becomes Kasturba (ba means mother) from Kastur (Gandhi ([1997] 2016, 5-40).

[19] When Kasturba came down with pneumonia, Gandhi, against her doctor's advice, denied her penicillin as

used to making important decisions without consulting her, he wanted her to submit to his whims. I contend that his marriage was a sham,[20] a bureaucratic hurdle for him to overcome, as by marrying, his parents would allow him to leave India.

Gandhi's queer sexuality manifests itself in a variety of ways. In 1906, he announced his vow of celibacy to the world without consulting Kasturba.[21] Despite having four children with her by this time, Gandhi had hardly lived with her in the period (1883-1906) between his marriage and his vows of celibacy. It is also around this time that Gandhi met and moved in with German architect Hermann Kallenbach, "a lifetime bachelor, gymnast and bodybuilder" (Lelyveld 2011, 88) On many occasions, Gandhi had disregarded Kasturba in a domestic sphere, but his self-righteous vow of sexual abstinence disgraced her publicly—it was also a gesture that only man can make and thus an ultimate sign of male privilege. Hindu Dharma Shastras dictate that men aged 25 to 50 should follow the *Grihastha Ashram*[22] and lead a family-centric life, pursuing material and sexual attachments as their dharma, but Gandhi flouted this religious edict.[23] Gandhi knew that Kasturba

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he distrusted medicines. She succumbed to the sickness and died in 1944. Conversely, a few years later, when he fell ill with malaria, he took quinine to cure himself.

[20] Although we know little firsthand about Kasturba's feelings toward Gandhi, she is presented as a strong woman, often compared to Hindu goddesses such as Sita and Savitri in brahminic narratives (Kishwar 1985; Tarlo 1997). Gandhi believed that people were attracted to her because "of her ability to lose herself" in him. Gandhi married her in 1883, but they hardly ever lived together. She went to live with him in South Africa in 1906. In the same year, Gandhi adopted celibacy. He was 38 years old. In his autobiography, Gandhi lamented his high-handedness toward Kasturba in the first years of their marriage, but that pattern dominated their relationship throughout. He wanted her to align her lifestyle and views completely with his: "My ambition was to make her live a pure life, learn what I learnt and identify her life and thought with mine" (Gandhi 1929, 15). Whenever she resisted his ideas or acts, he would ask her to leave. Gandhi recalled in his autobiography that despite their numerous arguments, "If my wife could not leave me, neither could I leave her." This was wishful thinking because leaving was not an option for Kasturba. As for Gandhi, he did whatever he wanted.

[21] Gandhi's whims are legendary, but within the domestic sphere, they seem cruel. He imposed his will on Kasturba in matters of celibacy and untouchability, but also in small matters. Once when Kasturba complained that home-spun Khadi was too thick and that she could not cook his food dressed in such uncomfortable attire, he told her she should not cook for him at all (1999, vol. 20: 306). If she complains about Gandhi to elderly women in the family, they would say, "For you, the highest ideal is to follow your husband. Whatever you do in following him, no sin will attach to you" (quoted in Nayar 1960, 41). See also Kalarthi (1962, 40).

[22] *Grihastha Ashram* is one of the four stages of man's life in Hinduism. A practicing Hindu should devote 1) his first 25 years being a *sisaya* (a student), 2) *grihastha* (a householder) from 25-50, 3) *vanaprastha* (a renouncer) from 25-75, and 4) *sannyasa* from 75-100. Hinduism also stresses the significance of a) *dharma* (duty), b) *artha* (material wealth), c) *kama* (pleasure), and d) *moksha* (renunciation). See Morgan ([1953]1987, 21), Olivelle (1992, 53-54). As a married man, Gandhi paid scant attention to his wife and thus ignored Hindu dharmic injunctions of *grihastha*, *kama*, and *artha.*

[23] While the practice of renunciation has a long history, it started as a movement against brahminic orthodoxy and became a way to opt out of dominant brahminic norms (for a detailed account, see Olivelle 1992, 19-57). Also, Gandhi's celibacy was quite strategic. Mundaka Upanisad says that those who go into the wilderness and "practice austerity and faith […] pass without stain through the sun's door to where that immortal person, the imperishable self, dwells" (Hume [1921]1971, 1.2.11). But those who renunciate and yet live in a *grama* (a household, a village) remain stuck in the cycle of birth and death

would not oppose him and that he would be admired in the long run for taking a pro-caste vow of *brahmacharya,* or celibacy. When brahminic narratives elevate Gandhi's brahmacharya, they ignore Kasturba completely. In addition, Gandhians portray Gandhi's choices only in a brahminic framework without questioning that Gandhi's brahmacharya might be a way to opt out of compulsory heterosexuality, which brahminic culture imposes on men and women.[24]

In line with social ethos, Gandhians vehemently reject any conjectures about Gandhi's non-normative sexuality. Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar offers a pro-brahminic explanation of what seems like Gandhi's homosexuality. According to Kakar, Gandhi was a believer in the Hindu idea that "sexuality has this elemental energy which gets dissipated. If it can be sublimated and contained it can give you spiritual power. Gandhi felt his political power really came from his celibacy, from his spiritual power" (quoted in Bidwai 2011, para. 7). Like Kakar, Upper-caste scholars guard Gandhi's heterosexual image and portray his dysfunctional marriage as ideal. However, Gandhi's letters to his male friend Hermann Kallenbach indicate his same-sex desire.[25] In one letter Gandhi wrote, "how completely you have taken possession of my body […] This is slavery with a vengeance" (Lelyveld 2011, 89). Elsewhere Gandhi hoped, "The day will come some day and the reunion will be all the sweeter for this compulsory separation" (1999, vol. 15: 42). If the reader ignores their same-sex gender, Gandhi and Kallenbach's correspondence reads like love letters, overflowing with markers of love and longing. On May 13, 1927, Gandhi wrote,

> As I lie in bed and look up old undisposed of correspondence and revive old and sacred memories, I chance upon your letter […] and I revive so many pleasant and sacred memories. Every letter that you have written during the last two years—and you have not written many—has been a despondent letter, distrustful of yourself; but as long as I live I am not going to lose faith in you. I am hoping that some day as before you will have a fatigue of the exciting things that give you momentary pleasure and that you will at least come to India

(Olivelle 1992, 45). Gandhi's approach to "celibacy" has little to do with theology and more to do with Brahminism.

[24] Romila Thapar(1978) shows that the practice of renunciation allows renunciants to "dissent" from brahminic orthodoxy (63-98), although she does not explicitly link renunciation with caste and sexuality.

[25] Not only with Kallenbach, Gandhi had similar but lesser-known same-sex relationships with other men that are narrated in ways that make them appear platonic. Gandhi's friendship with Sheikh Mehtab was a good case in point. Despite warnings from his family, Gandhi continued his friendship with Mehtab. Later, when Gandhi was settled in South Africa, instead of his wife and their children, he sent for Sheikh Mehtab "to come and live with him" in his 5-bedroom house, Beach Grove Villa, in Durban (Gandhi threw him out of his house when he caught Mehtab having sex with a prostitute). Gandhi never succeeded in explaining "the exact nature of their relationship" (Mehta 1977, 107). With regard to Kallenbach, the Indian community in South Africa, unlike people in India, assumed that "Gandhi, leaving his wife behind, had gone to live with a man" (Lelyveld 2011, 88).

> to meet an old friend and renew many old acquaintances. You have made a provisional promise to do so next September or October. Do come if you can and then stay as long as you like or as little as you like. (1999, vol. 38: 375)

Each would complain that the other was not writing enough. Gandhi would plead with Kallenbach not to abandon him: "Your letters, last two, have been brief and contained a trace of bitterness. The bitterness was due to the brevity of my letters" (1999, vol. 15: 22). Gandhi would frequently voice his loyalty, "For a time being, if I do not give you long letters, you will know that my whole time is given to organizing the Institution and looking after pat[ients]" (8). Gandhi also confided in him about his domestic life like a lover: "I feel like crying out to you, 'Do come and help me!' Mrs. Gandhi is again down with her swellings" (4). In his letters to Kallenbach, the name Kasturba was frequently followed by negative attributes (4, 7, 13-14). Also, since Kasturba is often sick, Gandhi refers to her as "a most difficult patient." Once when Kasturba upset Gandhi by questioning his highhandedness, Gandhi wrote to Kallenbach: "She is the most venomous woman I have ever met […]. All the charges she brought against me she undoubtedly means […]. Yes, a man who wishes to work with detachment must not marry" (1999, suppl. vol. 6: 181). The complaints, accusations, and anger that marked his relationship with Kasturba were curiously absent in his correspondence with Kallenbach.

Gandhi's contemporaries as well as latter-day Gandhians portrayed Kallenbach only as one of Gandhi's many followers, a friend at best. In *A Writer's People,* Naipaul writes about Gandhi's relationship with Kallenbach with great brahminic care:

> At the farm in 1912 he and his German friend Kallenbach gave up milk. (Kallenbach, a seeker after spirituality, was entirely under Gandhi's thumb. Gandhi, holy man and commune-leader as he had become, had begun to radiate a great personal authority. Two years later, in 1914, when they had left South Africa and were going to England, sharing a cabin, Gandhi and Kallenbach began to talk about the simple life. During this discussion Gandhi took Kallenbach's cherished binoculars and threw them through the porthole into the sea.) (2007, 111)

Naipaul initially describes Kallenbach as Gandhi's friend but then relegates him to the status of Gandhi's follower, emphasizing that it was Gandhi's aura that attracted people to him and that Kallenbach was merely a Gandhi enthusiast. Naipaul could have avoided Kallenbach altogether after labeling him Gandhi's friend, but he goes on to explain Gandhi's relationship with Kallenbach.

The fluent main narrative breaks into parentheses because Naipaul seems to feel a great need to place Gandhi's friendship with Kallenbach in a 'proper' perspective. As soon as Naipaul begins his defense of Gandhi's relationship with Kallenbach, it turns on its head. Kallenbach emerges as a close friend: Gandhi not only discusses personal matters with Kallenbach, he shares a cabin with him on their long sea voyages, and on a whim, he even throws Kallenbach's cherished belongings into the sea. All this selective, parenthetical information detailed by Naipaul complicates the supposedly Guru-disciple nature of Gandhi's relationship with Kallenbach that Naipaul offers.

Not only brahminic writers like Naipaul but also Gandhi himself participated in creating the figure of the mahatma. Gandhi would have been less forthcoming about his letters had he known that the world would change so dramatically that it would read him queerly.[26] Some letters that were too explicit Gandhi destroyed them.[27] He called them Kallenbach's "logical and charming love notes" (quoted in Lelyveld 2011, 88). By suppressing the queer Gandhi, Gandhians depicted him as a man of action who fought for Indian independence and who transcended lust and desire by aligning himself with Indian ascetic traditions. By constructing the figure of the mahatma, Gandhians attempt to turn him into a saint and national icon and thus into an idealized prototypical Brahmin. Therefore, even today, when a Gandhian scholar questions Gandhi's sexuality, such questioning invites hasty condemnation. A contemporary example is Joseph Lelyveld's reference to Gandhi's purportedly homosexual relationship with Kallenbach in his book *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle With India* (2011). Lelyveld offers a fascinating account of Gandhi's life, but mainstream India was incensed, although nowhere in the book did its author assign Gandhi any sexual label. He merely hinted at Gandhi's homosexuality by reading his letters, which was taken as a direct attack on India by brahminic cultural vanguards (Bajaj and Bosman 2011, paras. 2-6; see also Gandhi 2011). The book was banned and burned. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's views reflect that speculating about Gandhi's homosexuality amounts to defaming Gandhi as well as the Indian nation whom Gandhi represents:

> The writing is perverse in nature. It has hurt the sentiments of those with capacity for sane and logical thinking. This attempt to defame Mahatma Gandhi by the publisher has come under severe criticism not only in Gujarat but from all corners of India. Mahatma Gandhi is

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[26] Gandhi's critics have pointed out that Gandhi has framed the question of caste in a radically different manner in his English and Gujarati writings (Roy 2014, 41). The same pattern emerges with regard to desire. Gandhi might have (rightly) assumed that, since the masses in India hardly knew English, he could circumvent scrutiny, especially with regard to his frank correspondence with Hermann Kallenbach.

[27] The Indian government paid 1.1 million dollars to buy documents pertaining to Gandhi. These documents include the Gandhi-Kallenbach correspondence (see Biswas 2012).

> an idol not only in India but in the entire world. While his life—dedicated to the welfare of the mankind—has been an inspiration, the author has hurt the sentiments of crores [millions] of people. (quoted in Chotiner 2011, para. 2)

Implicit in the strong denouncement of the book was the brahminic fear of homosexuality. The status quo of the caste system and the nation-state (Brahminism) had to be defended against foreign intervention. In a convoluted way, the militant aggression against the book affirmed that the health of the Indian caste system is entwined with the regulation of sexuality and caste, which in turn negatively affects (queer) individuals.

I will suggest that the way Gandhi dealt with sexuality from his adolescence until middle age took its toll on him. He became quite eccentric in matters of sex as he grew older. He wrote profusely about his extraordinary experiments with (normative) sexuality,[28] but he destroyed some of Kallenbach's letters. Most of Gandhi's followers regarded Gandhi's sexual experiments[29] (he would sleep naked with young women to check whether he had conquered his sexual desire), as an exercise in spirituality.[30] Gandhi wrote about sex in such detail, and carried out his experiments under full public gaze, that his writings read more like lessons in caste for the masses. Assured of his growing saintly status, he was trying to regulate the sexuality of the masses in caste-appropriate ways. Even in present-day India, when Gandhian scholars expound on Gandhi's sexuality and link it to the ideas of dharma, ahimsa, and swaraj, such articulations become so esoteric that they ultimately read like a brahminic attempt to conceal Gandhi's homosexuality.

However, not everybody bought the pro-brahminic narrative about the nature of Gandhi's very public sexual experiments. Arundhati Roy pointed out that Gandhi's eccentric experiments, more than anything else, revealed Gandhi's hypocrisy, an outcome of his lifelong abstinence in both a caste and a sexual sense. In his old age he would sleep naked with his grandnieces, Manu and Abha, to test his celibacy (Adams 2011, 263-265; Banerji 2008, 265-281), thus assuring himself that he was pure in body and mind as if sleeping with two women, and not feeling sexually aroused, proved that he had transcended lust and desire. "For Gandhi to extrapolate after sleeping with two (or three, or four) women that he had, or had not, conquered heterosexual desire suggests he viewed

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[28] Vinay Lal gives a non-threatening, pro-caste account of Gandhi's "celibate sexuality" (2000, 105-136).

[29] Nirmal Kuman Bose, who worked as Gandhi's secretary in the 1940s, said that "after Gandhiji's death everyone wanted to suppress all further discussion of the brahmacharya experiments" (quoted in Mehta 1976, 193). Even contemporary Indian feminists such as Madhu Kishwar have maintained an unusual silence about Gandhi's view on sexuality or sexual (mis)conduct. See Kishwar (1985).

[30] In sharp contrast to his upper-caste followers and even critics, Gandhi's American and English critics such as Richard Grenier and Michael Edwards saw him as eccentric and hypocritical. Paul Johnson (1983) called Gandhi "a consummate sorcerer's apprentice." See Berger (1991, 73-82).

women not as individuals, but as a category" (Roy 2014, 79). Roy has also questioned Gandhi's morality in using young women for his sexual experiments, while disregarding the impact of such experiments on them and excluding the possibility that women, too, have desires. Unlike Roy, Gandhian discourse frames Gandhi's sexual experiments in ways that strengthen his mahatmahood but ignores the misogynistic premise on which his experiments were based.

There was every indication that Gandhi's very public experiments were certain to be successful: He was not attracted to women. For most of his life Gandhi was a husband in absentia. Also, his vow of celibacy at age 38, his intimate letters to Kallenbach, and his indifference toward Kasturba all seemed to suggest that he would not respond to young women's naked bodies in any event. Gandhi turned his every lack to good use. His experiments with sexuality were brilliantly creative ways to affect caste order. Gandhi went so far that he would advise young married couples to live like brothers and sisters, thus propagating the old brahminic idea that sex was only meant for procreation, not enjoyment. In *Navajivan* he wrote, "Married people should not violate Brahmacharya except with a view to progeny **(**Gandhi 2005, 162)."[31] The early Gandhi, who chased freedom and pleasure by learning English**,** going to England, and disregarding caste norms, changed dramatically two decades later.

Gandhi's subtle pro-brahminic approach sheds its subtleness, depending upon where and to whom he is speaking. In 1920, Gandhi said that Congress was "an organization for the mob" (1999, vol. 21: 246). He also believed that this "mob was without a mind" and it needed to be "taught and led […] by a few intelligent, sincere, local workers […] and the whole nation can be organized to act intelligently, and democracy can be evolved out of mobocracy" (246-284). Gandhi's contempt for the masses cannot be separated from his conviction that (non-brahminic) masses must be trained and disciplined by more intelligent human beings—a select few brahminic volunteers like him—to resist the British. As a leader of the masses, Gandhi must have encountered several challenges and had to be realistic, but his emphatic belief that a few select brahminic volunteers could educate and lead the vast masses of India reveals his concealed Brahminism.

Gandhi's engagement and even submission to dominant norms was not without antecedents. He was slowly becoming, or rather projecting himself to be, a Rama-like figure.[32] He knew of Rama's hold on Indians. Rama's character is a prime example of a person who follows dharma by

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[31] See Gandhi's views on sex in his essay titled "Brahmacharya " (1927, 475-491 Gandhi's politics negate "sexuality" (see Parekh 1989 quoted in Mondal 2002, 924). Gandhi's attitude toward sexuality, especially women's, reflects his pro-caste politics.

[32] Gandhi's conception of Ram Rajya (the reign of Lord Rama) or his daily prayers derived their vitality from high brahminic texts such as the Geeta. Often he said, "I wish I could die with the name of Rama on my lips." While all this can be seen as benign and even saintly, these texts shaped Gandhi's peculiar views on sex and informed his caste politics.

sacrificing his happiness for the sake of his family. In the epic *Ramayana,* Rama leaves home to live in the forest for fourteen years in order to resolve a dispute between his father and stepmother as to who should be crowned King of Ayodhya. The trajectory of Rama's life echoes in many real and imaginary, ancient and contemporary stories. The underlying idea of these stories is mainly to glorify dharma which is directly linked to caste. Characters, events, and themes may emerge in any order but, eventually, they solidify caste. Not only Rama's but also Buddha's story seems similar to Gandhi's,[33] which is to say that there was nothing accidental about Gandhi—he modeled himself on ontologically tested Hindu ideas, practices, and images. Like Rama and Buddha, Gandhi too goes on a personal quest by leaving home. In a brahminic context, such quests are always framed as spiritual and pro-brahminic. Any alternative reading is censured.

Even when Western writers or scholars engage with central brahminic texts, contexts, or figures, they align with Brahminism in that they remain oblivious to caste. However, if they present ideas that go against the brahminic order they are either banned or absorbed into the mainstream brahminic narrative. For example, while Lelyveld's book on Gandhi is actively banned, Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922) is subsumed into the brahminic fold. Although Hesse's novel alludes to Siddhartha's quest as both spiritual and sexual, brahminic narratives immediately accept the spiritual aspects of Siddhartha's journey, but reject any connection to non-normative sexuality at once as anti-brahminic. Whereas Hesse's novel can be read for its strong homoerotic content, in a brahminic context it can only be read in a way that conceptualizes the world as brahminic and heterosexual and regards brahminic reality as supreme and singular. About Siddhartha, Hesse writes "Love stirred in the hearts of the young Brahmins' daughters when Siddhartha walked through the streets of the town, with his lofty brow, his king-like eyes and his slim figure" ([1922]1951, 1). But the adolescent Siddhartha, "the handsome Brahmin's son" (1), instead becomes disillusioned with his privileged existence, with its ultimate meaninglessness (2-4). After he renounces the world and goes in quest for truth, he is distracted by the courtesan Kamla, who describes him as "the best lover" (59). Siddhartha responds to her skills in lovemaking. But with regard to his friend Govinda, Siddhartha makes an active gesture, inviting Govinda to kiss him. Govinda "was compelled by a great love and presentiment to obey him; he leaned close to him and touched his forehead with his lips. As he did this something wonderful happened to him" (120). Although such moments in the

[33] The influence of Lord Rama on Gandhi permeates the entire body of his work. To him, Rama "is a form of Brahman, the image of truth and non-violence" (1999, vol. 41: 279). Throughout his political career, Gandhi invoked the figure of *Maryada Purushottam* Rama and motivated Indians not only to fight against the oppressive English regime but to establish an independent India as *Ram Rajya*. In popular culture, Gandhi's journey is compared to Rama and Buddha. In his essay "Looking and Not Seeing: The Indian Way," V. S. Naipaul wrote "If Gandhi's journey can be compared with anyone else's, it is with that of another Indian, the Buddha" (2007, 115).

novel clearly highlight the homoerotic dimensions of Siddhartha's story, they do not last but merely flicker for a while before they are extinguished under the heavy weight of high Hindu doctrines of moksha, karma, samsara or maya that resolutely turns all desire into a heterosexual desire mediated by caste norms. Scholars, both Indian and western, tend to read Siddhartha in ways that emphasize its connection with central Hindu texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita*. Eugene Timpe (1970) notes that "hardly a commentator on this work has failed to mention the close relationship which apparently exists between it and the principal religious philosophy of India" (346). There is a marked tendency to transform Siddhartha into a saintly figure, his male friend, the boatman, into his spiritual anchor, and his wife and children as distractions to his quest for *moksha*, or enlightenment. Although Siddhartha's story transcends the human realm and cannot be read literally, any alternative reading of the text is seen as an affront to Brahminism. Siddhartha's story resonates with that of Gandhi, but there are also important differences. Like Siddhartha, Gandhi left home but then returned. Unlike Siddhartha, Gandhi did not seek moksha by escaping the world. Also, Gandhi's world was not wholly brahminic. Underneath his fakir's garb, Gandhi was a hybrid figure, drawing from both Western and Eastern traditions to engage with the world (Naipaul 2007, 112; Lal 2009, 281). Instead of running away from the world, he engaged with it using his eclectic experiences and education but without giving up caste.

Gandhi understood those who "work the world" in the Indian milieu, but rather than reforming the (brahminic) world, he participated in it in ways that served him and strengthened Brahminism. The societal constraints that the early Gandhi experienced are not unusual. Everyone is expected to submit to them, and those who do not or cannot submit are treated like outcasts. However, unlike Gandhi, not everyone has the grit and imagination to turn a position of weakness into a strength. Gandhi negotiated caste norms in pro-brahminic ways: his heterosexual marriage, his celibacy, and his "focus on vegetarianism" (Wiegandt 2019, 122) all served a pro-caste purpose and practically all caste communities supported Gandhi in his endeavors. Throughout his life, Gandhi struggled with the question of caste in a way that portrayed him both as its victim and its perpetrator. A victim because he submitted to caste norms after his initial rebellion against his family and community before going to England, and a perpetrator because, as an upper-caste male, he manipulated others, which included his wife and Dalits. Only in the last years of his life when Gandhi became a mahatma did he fully come to support inter-dining and inter-marriage irrespective of caste considerations. However, by this time, India had moved on; the political Gandhi was not relevant anymore.[34] "The mahatma has been absorbed into the formless spirituality and decayed

[34] Gandhi felt increasingly alienated in post-independent India. He was disillusioned with the Nehru government (1999, vol. 98: 57, 79, 84, 135, 154, 202). On December 18, 1947, Gandhi wrote, "I know

pragmatism of India. The revolutionary became a god and his message was thereby lost" (Naipaul 1964, 82). Like many prior saints, Gandhi, the mahatma, could deliver anti-caste sermons that had no relevance in the 'real' world that was brahminic to its core.

2. Narayan's Malgudi

The brahminic utopia that Gandhi imagined independent India to be recalls the fictitious town of Malgudi in which R. K. Narayan sets his work. By any account, Narayan's Malgudi is a brahminic utopia. Although it exists nowhere in actuality, it is admired for its authentic Indianness. It has nice houses, a school, a college, a hospital, a train station, temples, the river Sarayu, and low mountains surrounding the town. Narayan imbues the place with a brahminic spirit without attracting any negative attention from Narayan scholars. The stories that take place in this geography erase as well as perpetuate caste and frame the world as brahminic. Since Narayan's stories seem free of any ideological bias, they effectively align the reader with Brahminism. Even though Narayan uses the English language, his muse is embedded in brahminic texts. Born into a middle-class, educated, conservative Iyer Brahmin family in south India, he is familiar with ancient religious texts such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* which, I argue, emerges in his work to reinforce caste order.

The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* play such a vital role in everyday life in India that one gets to know them like one's own language.[35] All major Hindu festivals and rituals can be traced to these texts, which assign caste meaning to days, months, seasons, landscapes, and ceremonies of birth, death, and marriage, rendering everyday life brahminic. Each ritual in some way turns the world into binaries of *shubh* and *ashubh*, high and low, and touchable and untouchable. What makes these two texts so effective are the processes through which they disseminate Brahminism. Without giving commandments or imposing strictures, they offer a bewildering variety of interesting stories and rituals that make ordinary people effectively pro-brahminic. These epic poems do not try to create a "willing suspension of disbelief." They entrench belief by making brahminic reality the only reality through the Indian tradition of storytelling based on rasa.[36] Before examining the use of

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that today I irritate everyone. […] What irks me is that people deceive me. They should tell me frankly that I have become old, that I am no longer of any use and that I should not be in their way. If they thus openly repudiate me I shall not be pained in the least. And I shall also then cultivate the indomitable strength needed to serve *Daridranarayana* [God in the form of the poor]" (1999, vol. 98: 72). Gandhi "contributed" immensely to Hindu-Muslim unity, but his caste politics and "missionary activity" remain embedded in Brahminism to the last (Roy 2014, 82, 130). From July 1947 until January 30, 1948, the day he was assassinated, Gandhi wrote well over 1,000 letters, none of which were addressed to Dalits (*CMWG* vol. 96, 97, 98). Oddly, while Gandhi, unlike any other politician or writer, wrote extensively about untouchability (Eleanor 1992, 150), he hardly ever corresponded with Untouchables.

[35] These two texts influenced culture, literature, and everyday life in India. Brahminic writers (Gandhi, Narayan, and Naipaul) have drawn from these texts extensively in their works.

[36] Whereas the word "rasa" (juice, taste, emotion, or aesthetic flavor) appears in the *Rig Veda*, it is Bharata

these two texts in Narayan's work, I wish to make a few preliminary remarks on their relevance in contemporary India, thus showing that Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the novel as as an open-ended genre and the epic as a closed or "utterly finished thing" (1981, 17) works differently in the Indian context. Theoretically, one might agree with Bakhtin's formulation of novel and epic genres, but empirical evidence—the manner in which the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are received in everyday life in India—demonstrates that the Indian epics take on the power of the modern novel.

The whole country was glued to their television sets in the 1980s when the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* were televised (Tully 1992, 127-152; 2012, 102-125).[37] Although the majority of Indians already knew these epics broadly, the new technology seduced people even more. On the surface, these epics entertain and appear free of any ideological bias,[38] but when they are probed they open up to a vast array of interpretations that manifest both their strengths and weaknesses. Brahmins believe that all human behavior can be explained via these texts, including the practice of untouchability. While very few people in India can decipher these texts in their original form, brahminic scholars and pundits interpret them in ways that reconfirm the caste system. Since these epics frame all visible reality as an illusion—everybody is part of Brahman, differences of caste, gender, and the human-animal divide are temporal—they emphasize that one can transcend the temporal but cyclical nature of existence by following dharma. The brahminic practice of giving *daan* (charity) is one way of following dharma.[39] Everyone appreciates upper-caste daan givers, but no one questions how they come to hold positions from which they can give daan. Also, the everyday brahminic practice of giving leftovers to Untouchables is one of the most explicit ways to

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Muni who developed the theory of rasa in the *Natyashastra.* Indian performing arts centered on rasas. It has been called the fifth Veda (Reddy and Dhavan 2004, 4), and its thirty-sex chapters are considered "a comprehensive repository of knowledge and a very powerful vehicle for the expression of emotions" (Schechner 2006, 45). For more on the rasa theory, see Higgins (2007, 43-54), Hogan (2003, 37-52), Ibkar (2015, 80-87), Raghavan (1967, 36-48)

[37] Shreevatsa Nevatia (2020) makes a strong connection between the emergence of Hindutva politics by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the right-wing party currently in power and the demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992. One way in which the BJP dealt with the Covid-19 pandemic that affected millions of "migrant" workers in India was by retelecasting the epics on national television and by formally beginning the construction of the Rama temple in Ayodhya on August 05, 2020. See Gettleman and Kumar (2020).

[38] Mythology in these epics is what Roland Barthes calls a "second-order semiological system" ([1957] 2010, 114). However, the Barthian approach fails to take into account the continued presence of a spiritual or religious imperative in brahminic constructions of myth, where secular myths may be framed as sacred myths and vice versa. As Aparna Halpe has argued that "to assume that the collective investment in a myth (sacred or secular) is simply a question of ideology is to miss the capacity of myth to function as a narrative that also invokes a sense of transcendental meaning in relation to key mythemes" (2010, 14).

[39] Jacob Copeman (2011) and Devdutt Pattanaik (2019) have discussed the concept of daan in a positive way, but they have ignored how daan, when seen in conjunction with other concepts such as karma, moksha, yagna and so forth, perpetuates caste order.

remind them of their degraded status. Structurally, the practice of daan keeps caste hierarchies intact. However, framing concepts in this way, as a means of practicing dharma, reinforces that Brahmin and Dalit manifestations are the consequences of the karma from previous lives, thus propagating the brahminic belief that one must respect the existing caste-hierarchies since future lives are linked to the observance of dharma in the present moment. Dalits are thus made to accept their low position in the caste hierarchy.

Whereas both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* frame the world as brahminic, brahminic ideologues prefer the *Ramayana* because, unlike the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* explicitly sanctions Brahminism. The *Mahabharata* also frames the world as brahminic, but it offers a multiplicity of interpretations about life situations that open up spaces to challenge Brahminism. It says, "*yad na iha asti na tat kvacit,*" which means, "what is not here is nowhere" **(**Mishra 1991, 200). The *Mahabharata* thus acknowledges the existence of all things. As a text it is more open, diverse, and complex because it engages with non-brahminic, or even anti-brahminic, ideas and things. Unlike writers who focus much more on the *Ramayana* to portray the world as upper-caste and heterosexual, anti-brahminic writers use the more complex *Mahabharata* to broaden the conversation around caste and sexuality. It is, therefore, the *Mahabharata*, not the *Ramayana*, that enters Roy's *The God of Small Things.* The story of Velutha's marginality in Roy's novel echoes the story of Sutaputra (son of the lowly caste) Karna in the *Mahabharata*. By making these connections, Roy links the practice of caste and the primacy of heterosexuality in present-day India to an ancient text and thereby adds the authority and prestige of this text to her criticism of contemporary Indian society. While such depictions do not destabilize the status quo, they nevertheless weaken it. Since the *Mahabharata* is replete with characters and situations that complicate the neat brahminic narrative of the *Ramayana*, anti-brahminic writers like Roy use the *Mahabharata* to question dominant narratives while brahminic writers such as Narayan mainly rely on the *Ramayana* to impose brahminic order. I will discuss in chapters III and IV how these two epics play radically different roles in the works of Narayan and Roy.

I wish to cite two examples from contemporary life regarding the brahminic use of the *Ramayana* and the anti-brahminic use of the *Mahabharata*. In 2018, Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, mocked a female member of the Indian parliament, Renuka Chaudhary, who laughed out loud during his speech which contained statements that she found to be outrageously false. The parliamentary Speaker Venkaiah Naidu said to Renuka Chaudhary, "If you have some problem, go to the doctor please" and termed her behavior as "loose, dark, and unruly" (Watch 2018). But Modi went on to compare her laughter to that of Surpanakha, a female demonic figure from the *Ramayana.* Just by invoking a name from the *Ramayana*, Modi managed to censure

Renuka Chaudhary in a far more economic and incisive manner than Naidu. Other parliamentarians, primarily men, immediately understood his quip and followed it with unbridled laughter which was intended to silence the offending woman. In the epic, Surpanakha is shown as a demon because she pursues desire, which makes her demonic in the brahminic imagination. When Surpanakha sees Lord Rama in the forest, she is filled with desire and tries to seduce him. In retaliation, Laxman, Rama's younger brother, cuts off her nose. Since Surpanakha represents wild sexuality, passion, and lust, she is the Other of Rama's wife, Sita**.** Rama says to Laxman, "Mutilate this ugly, unvirtuous, extremely ruttish, great-bellied raksasi [female demon]" (Erndl 1991, 71). The text justifies Laxman's act of disfiguring Surpapnakha's face for articulating her desire. Uma Chakravarti (2006, 235) puts it aptly: "That the punishment is regarded as justified is an index of how successfully the ideological premises of patriarchal violence have been incorporated into everyday life by the stereotypes of good and bad in the *Ramayana* of which the Surpanakha episode is a structural component." Interestingly, when men in the Indian parliament (or outside it) indulge in abusive behavior, other men do not reprimand them. Likewise, even in an ancient text like the *Ramayana,* men do not cut the noses of other men for showing desire**.**

Conversely, the *Mahabharata* can emerge in an unexpectedly anti-brahminic way. In the 1980s, when the high-profile actress Neena Gupta gave birth to a child out of wedlock, the media hounded her, called her names, and asked her to disclose the name of the child's father. Unlike many unwed mothers in India who either terminate their pregnancies or abandon their illegitimate children **(**Das 2016, 176-177),[40] Neena Gupta publicly acknowledged the child and thus threatened the brahminic status quo. However, when the press constantly degraded her, she said that first go and ask Draupadi to identify the father of her children. The story of Draupadi, which appears in the *Mahabharata*, is most intriguing. After winning her as a wife, Arjun takes Draupadi to meet his mother. Arjun's eldest brother, Yudhister**,** knocks on the door and says, mother, look what Arjun has won. Their mother, without coming to the door, says, whatever it is, share it. Consequently, Draupadi becomes the wife of all five brothers. Experts on the *Mahabharata* offer pro-brahminic explanations for Draupadi's marriage, but its unusualness persists. By alluding to Draupadi's marriage, Gupta turned the label of un- or anti-Indian on its head. What the media were framing as being outside Indian culture was placed instead at its very heart by Gupta's astute question**.**

Returning to Narayan, I suggest that, by using texts like the *Ramayana,* he portrays the world as brahminic and, in so doing, erases non-brahminic others such as the Dalits. Some core

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[40] In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" ([1985]1994), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes about Bhuvanesawari Bhaduri who committed *sati*-suicide during her menstrual period so that her suicide could not be "diagnosed as the outcome of illegitimate passion" (103), underscoring the connection between caste purity and women's bodies.

features of Narayan's work remain unchanged from one text to another. No matter what happens in his stories, the end is predominantly pleasant: Malgudi never fails to regain its peace and order.

In *The Guide* (1958), after flirting with a range of radical situations, Narayan firmly reaffirms caste order in Malgudi. The novel's central character, Raju, a petty criminal, is modeled partially on Gandhi and other Rama-like figures. When Raju returns to Malgudi after serving a prison sentence, now stigmatized, he hesitates to enter the town. The villagers take him for some kind of ascetic due to his shabby and changed appearance. He denies being a saint, but they take his denial as further evidence of his saintliness. There has been a severe drought in the region for some time and the villagers believe that if Raju prays for them, the drought will end. Through their unwavering trust, they turn a common man into a saint. The text does not make any explicit link between Raju's fasting and rain, but before the novel ends, dark clouds loom on the horizon. The enervated Raju says, " 'Velan, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs—' and with that he sagged down" (Narayan [1958]1978, 221). Not only does the trajectory of Raju's life follow the four stages of the *grihastha ashram*, the novel's non-assertive ending strengthens the Hindu belief system (Paranjape 2003, 180-182). Through Raju's story, Narayan reinforces central Hindu ideas of dharma, rebirth, asceticism, and moksha. Also, toward the end, Rosie, who earlier had left her (impotent but wealthy) husband for Raju, returns to him. She has redeemed her earlier transgressive actions because now she covers her head. The first part of the book shows Raju and Rosie as daring, norms-defying characters, but the second half depicts them as the embodiments of ideal Hindu figures: Raju comes to echo Rama's sacrificial nature, Buddha's generosity, and Gandhi's resilience, while Rosie comes to epitomize Rama's dutiful wife, Sita.

Despite Narayan's explicitly pro-brahminic fiction, the narratives of his authenticity persist. Both the content of Narayan's novels and what surrounds them reinforce Brahminism—what Gerard Genette calls a paratext, "a zone between text and off-text, a zone […] of transaction," (Genette 2001, 2) that shapes public opinion in the desired way. The cover pages of Narayan's novels have pictures of gods and goddesses and prototypical Hindu men and women. Such images solidify the myth of Narayan's Malgudi as exclusively brahminic. Even when apolitical blurbs or images appear, among the brahminic ones, they enhance Narayan's authenticity. When Elizabeth Bowen describes Narayan's novel, *The English Teacher*, as "an idyll as delicious as anything that she has read in modern literature," or when Compton Mackenzie refers to the novel as "an exquisite experience," or when John Updike admires "the profound equanimity of his Hindu vision" (1997, 134), they seem unaware that Narayan's brahminic ideology governs the novel.[41]

[41] See the back cover page of R.K. Narayan, *The English Teacher* (London: Minerva, [1945]1993).

However, paratexts can sometimes reveal what the author tries to conceal, or what the text obscures. Narayan's *Guide* was adapted into a film with his approval and became a huge hit, but as long as he lived, he accused the filmmakers of destroying his book (Narayan 2001, 487-499). I contend that Narayan's strong disapproval of the film was connected to his brahminic ideology. Although the film follows the novel's main plot, it changes the novel's tempo as it adheres to certain conventions specific to Indian movies such as the inclusion of musical numbers. One song in the film has become a feminist anthem over time. Its radical lyrics celebrate female sexuality and thus make an anti-Indian gesture (Mondal 2015, paras. 1-3). By leaving her husband and uniting with Raju, Rosie crosses a threshold with abandon and "in defiance of social norms" (Deshpande 2004, 5182). The viewer celebrates her freedom while noting that, despite her spectacularly transgressive acts, unprecedented in Indian cinema, Rosie ultimately returns to her husband. The film blasts Narayan's reticence about sex. Rosie's unbridled sexuality mocks the brahminic norms, thus offending the writer whose work embodies those norms. Unlike the novel, the film has Rosie singing sensuous songs with her lover. Had Narayan presented her in this way, it would have been difficult for him to bring her back to her husband at the end of the novel. Although Narayan depicts Rosie as the Other of an ideal brahminic woman, her Otherness is always manageable in his hands. He depicts her transgressions, and then her submission, in a way that powerfully affirms brahminic norms. Narayan's lifelong complaint against the film is its success in showing Rosie's sexuality in a celebratory light, a gesture that berates and threatens brahminic culture.

Daisy in *The Painter of Signs* (1976) is another Rosie-like character, but, unlike Rosie, Daisy is the true brahminic Other—someone who can never be contained within the brahminic fold of Malgudi**.** Daisy, a fiercely independent woman, comes to Malgudi to spread awareness about birth control, and Raman, an upper-caste man from Malgudi, helps her to disseminate her message with billboards. Whereas Daisy's goal is noble, the novel portrays her as a disrupter. By giving her a Western name without a caste name, Narayan stresses her foreignness and presents her like an outcast figure (also, daisies are not native to India).[42] Many in Malgudi distrust Daisy's birth-control-related projects and believe that she is corrupting women. Also, since Daisy lives a free life, she is resented in Malgudi. Although Raman and Daisy marry, she leaves him one day after their wedding, saying, "Married life is not for me. I have thought over it. It frightens me" (Narayan 1976, 178). This abrupt change comes as a surprise because Daisy has a Gandharva Vivah with Raman, a kind of love marriage that does not require witnesses or the observance of caste

[42] Naming plays a key role in indicating who belongs to Narayan's Malgudi (see Basu 2013, 221-222). The *Natyashasta* propounds that a name should suggest, or correspond to, a person's station in life, that is, his or her caste status. The act of naming not only grades people into high and low categories but also excludes. The name Daisy is identified as an outcaste or nonbrahminic name.

rituals and ceremonies. Daisy's self-reliance, her scientific outlook, and her uninhibited attitude render her foreign to Malgudi at the outset and make her ultimately leave the town.

While Narayan goes out of his way to present Daisy in a negative light, he remains oblivious to Raman's flaws. When Raman presents Daisy to his orthodox aunt, his aunt disapproves of her: "What is her caste? What is her history? She ran away from home! Don't you know all that?" (124) At another point, when Daisy warns Raman, "If you want to marry me, you must leave me to my own plans even when I am a wife. On any day you question why or how, I will leave you" (124). In response, the narrative voice notes the "mad glint in her eyes," something that evades Raman. In moments like these the narrator's point of view appears conterminous with Narayan's (Puranik 1993, 128). By vilifying Daisy's liberated sexuality and the choices she makes, the author removes the focus from Raman. Since Narayan's sympathies lie with Raman, he does not probe Raman's character with the same intensity with which he scrutinizes Daisy's character. For instance, despite his passion for Daisy, Raman accepts her decision when she leaves him as if he were expecting her to go. Although they have a Gandharva Vivah, that is, they marry out of love, Narayan's novel shows, and also validates, its limitation. Gandharva Vivah has a prominent place in Hindu traditions (Vanita 2004, 124-125)—many gods and goddesses, including Lord Rama and Sita, have Gandharva marriages—, but it is considered an imprudent and even invalid union when it comes to men and women in brahminic families that hold caste-considerations in high regard. By stressing her nonnormative marriage and name, the narrative portrays her as the opposite of Sita, who can never be the wife of his brahminic hero Rama(n). Before Daisy arrives in his life, Raman is happily single, and when she leaves him, he looks forward to joining his male friends, "a habitual group of fellow lunchers […] who come together to exchange views on almost everything discuss anything […] and, rejuvenated by their brief exchanges, go their different ways" (Basu 2013, 224). This arguably homoerotic will to join the company of his male friends, and live perpetually in that male company, seems to be Raman's need from the start, but Daisy refuses to participate in a happy marriage charade that is essentially queer.

Narayan's main characters are overwhelmingly upper-caste, taking the names of Hindu gods and goddesses. Although they may not be overtly religious, they always have some elderly characters around them who are practicing Hindus and thus repositories of "traditional values" (Ramanan 2014, 129-130). Narayan's unconventional female characters are given names like Daisy and Rosie, suggesting their non-brahminic caste status. Through all these seemingly benign tropes, Narayan renders his Malgudi as brahminic. In addition, Narayan's texts are haunted by Hindu theology and myth (Atkinson 1987, 16). His themes, characters, and situations echo episodes from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Unlike many other Indian writers who write in English,

Narayan was well-versed in Sanskrit texts. His work subtly reiterates that whatever is good in Indian civilization lies in the past—not in modernity or modern science, but in the Vedic times that supposedly contain the wisdom by which one should aspire to live. When the figure of Gandhi appears in his work, it takes on the features of Lord Rama, and thus evokes a world that Narayan endorses and promotes. If Narayan's brahminic characters are distracted from their dharma, their righteous path, the distraction is never so enormous that there is no possibility of return. They always find their way back and take up where they left off. Also, Narayan's brahminic characters frequently get distracted by non-brahminic others, including anti-caste ideas and Western technology. However, the disruption of peace in Malgudi is always manageable in Narayan's hands—the seemingly apolitical writer reestablishes his upper-caste characters in the brahminic fold, rooted in the Vedas, by thwarting the outside influences in the end. And thus Narayan emerges as a literary equivalent of the political Gandhi.

3. Naipaul's Gaze

The opening line of Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* ([1979]1989) "The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it" (3) has a striking diagnostic edge. One can not equate a statement from a novel with an author's view, but Naipaul makes similar statements in his non-fiction work. Commenting on cleaning men in India in his book *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul declares, "They are dirt; they wish to appear as dirt" (1964, 79). Thus he seems to endorse hierarchies as an undeniable feature of the world. The tone of the sentence, its finality, its ideological rationale, and its traces of biological eugenics seem to drive much of Naipaul's work, I suggest, in two ways. As a Westerner, he takes London as the center of the world (a metonym for the West) and the rest as its periphery, its Other. As a brahminic writer, his critique of India, I argue, is frequently the critique of non-brahminic India. Although Naipaul appears "to be outside caste," his work shows he has "a soft corner for Brahminical traditions." (Khair 2001, 148-149).

Unlike Gandhi and Narayan, Naipaul was Indian only by descent. He was born in 1936 in Trinidad**,** educated in England, and he could hardly speak any Indian language, but, like them, he was upper-caste—a Brahmin to be precise. Many scholars have pointed out that his views are biased against non-Western cultures and people (Hariharan 2003, 125-126).[43] Noted Indian writer

[43] Hariharan (2003) mentions writers such as Derek Walcott, Edward Said, Ivan Van Sertima, and Nissim Ezekiel who criticized Naipaul for his extreme biases toward non-white cultures. Chinua Achebe referred to him as a "restorer of the comforting myths of the white race"; H.B Singh called him a "despicable lackey of neocolonialism," and Eric Roach dubbed Naipaul a "cold and sneering prophet" (Healy 1985,

Nissim Ezekiel in his essay, "Naipaul's India and Mine," wrote that criticism "must attack, even denounce, but it must not deny human beings their humanity. In *An Area of Darkness* Mr. Naipaul comes dangerously close to doing that" (Ezekiel 1976, 204). However, the continuous debate over Naipaul's imperial attitude conceals his Brahminism. Naipaul poses as a Westerner when he studies the "peripheral" non-Western world. However, with regard to India, his approach is twofold: It is simultaneously imperialist and brahminic. As an imperialist, he offers a critique of India that focuses primarily on non-brahminic India (such as Dalits, Muslims, tribals), not brahminic India. As a Brahmin, he aligns himself with brahminic ideology (Misra 2015, 215-231). When he describes the entire continent of Africa as a complete system that does not need improvement and that "Africa has no future" (quoted in Hardwick [1979] 1997, 49) and asserts, more generally, that "The world is what it is; men who are nothing, […] have no place in it," he reveals an imperialist's outlook and a brahminic way of looking at the world. On the surface, Naipaul's work appears to be anti-Indian, but a closer examination of his work reveals his Brahminism. Arguably, this happens because the anglicized Naipaul's childhood was shaped by caste.

I will demonstrate how Naipaul's brahminic critics and Western admirers, in their enthusiasm to censure or embrace him, fail to perceive his latent Brahminism. Nowhere does Brahminism emerge in such convoluted ways as it does in Naipaul's oeuvre. Despite his emphasis on neutrality as an observer, Naipaul's caste sensibility influences his "way of looking." In *An Area of Darkness* (1964), when Naipaul encounters the surging crowds in Bombay, he provides the reader an insight into the nature of the complex forces that have shaped him:

> And for the first time in my life I was one of the crowd. There was nothing in my appearance or dress to distinguish me from the crowd […]. In Trinidad to be an Indian was distinctive. To be anything there was to be distinctive; difference was each man's attribute.To be an Indian in England was distinctive […]. Now in Bombay I entered a shop or a restaurant and awaited a special quality of response. And there was nothing. It was like being denied part of my reality. […] I had been made by Trinidad and England; recognition of my difference was necessary to me. I felt the need to impose myself, and didn't know how. (Naipaul 1964, 45-46)

How differently Naipaul, being a dark-skinned man, seems to have experienced Trinidad and England, even when both societies function along racial lines that value whiteness and relegate nonwhiteness to being inferior. Naipaul's claim that in Trinidad and England "difference was each

45-63).

man's attribute" and to be different is to be "distinctive" is a polite way of referring to societies that are culturally run along racial lines, and since Naipaul aligns himself with whiteness he seems to endorse racial hierarchies. As a Western visitor in India, he distances himself from the Bombay crowd, fearing that the crowd will dissolve his distinctiveness. Naipaul turns Fanon's "Look, a negro!" (Fanon 1986, 112) on its head by framing the white gaze as something that nourishes him, thus obliterating the racial violence embedded in Fanon's "Look, a negro!" Like other post-colonial critics, Edward Said (1986, 53) has accused Naipaul of aligning with whiteness for pragmatic reasons, but I argue that Naipaul's "way of looking" is marked by his brahminic sensibility, something that has escaped Naipaul scholars. In *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul's brahminic "horror of the unclean" (194) surfaces thus:

> Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the river beaches; they defecate on the hills; they defecate on the banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover […].
>
> These squatting figures—to the visitor, after a time, as eternal and emblematic as Rodin's Thinker—are never spoken of; they are never written about; […] *Indians do not see these squatters* and might even, with complete sincerity, deny that they exist. (Naipaul 1964, 74-75)

Here, in exposing the already exposed and dwelling in such excess on defecating Indians, Naipaul places himself squarely within the orientalist discourse on India. His hysterical tone throughout this quotation mirrors brahminic disgust for and obsession with filth on which the practice of untouchability rests. He draws a boundary between those Indians "who defecate everywhere" and those who "with complete sincerity deny that they exist." Naipaul's orientalist claim that "Indians defecate everywhere" quickly gains another hue in the hands of brahminic Naipaul. He draws a line between "squatting and defecating" figures and those who deny their existence, presumably upper castes. As an orientalist, he remarks upon what Indians do not see. As a Brahmin, he makes the distinction between brahminic castes and non-brahminic masses by placing the burden of filth only on the latter**.** Naipaul does not ask any questions that may segue into the larger politics of filth and excrement and thus draw attention to the brahminic ontological recoil from filth—not wanting to touch or be touched by it; outsourcing it to the Dalit body which then carries the burden of untouchability. Naipaul rightly critiques the barbaric practice of defecating in the open, but he erases the violent practice of untouchability by which brahminic people extricate themselves from

the business of filth and defecation (see Douglas 1966, 125). Naipaul's work on India presents his imperial propensities in a way that both hides and exposes his Brahminism:

> I had seen the starved child defecating at the roadside while the mangy dog waited to eat the excrement. I had seen the physique of the people of Andhra [Pradesh], which had suggested the possibility of an evolution downwards, wasted body to wasted body, Nature mocking herself, incapable of remission. Compassion and pity did not answer; they were refinements of hope. Fear is what I felt. Contempt is what I had to fight against […] in the end it was fatigue that overcame me. (Naipaul 1964, 48)

Here, again, the idea of Indian "darkness" and "wretchedness" comes forth most strongly in terms of filth. By putting the defecating child, mangy dog, and excrement in such close proximity, the Naipaulean recoil embedded in his 'touch me not' voice signals the everyday brahminic practice of untouchability. Like a photographer, Naipaul records the scene, but without intervening (the mangy dog could have harmed the starved child). The starved child's excrement becomes the writer's material. By obsessing over the scenes of defecating children and adults everywhere, the writer not only constructs India as "the area of darkness" but also uses it in legitimizing the brahminic practice of untouchability**.** While Naipaul sees 'shit' everywhere ("Indians defecate everywhere"), he sees "nature mocking" the "wasted" bodies of Indians only in the state of Andhra Pradesh.[44] After making these highly selective observations, nothing positive comes out of it except that the brahminic Naipaul feels assailed by fear and contempt and ultimately fatigue. The starved body of the child, the wasted bodies of adults, and the sight of defecating Indians emerge as fuel for brahminic discourse.

Naipaul's "way of looking" assigns people high and low status according to their castes. Even when his gaze moves from masses on the streets to specific people, or when he comments on Indian art, architecture, and literature, he shows his caste sensibility.[45] He views brahminic people sympathetically, but this sympathy is not extended to non-brahminic people. When Naipaul talks

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[44] While "defecating" and "wasted" bodies can be seen in all major cities in India, Naipaul specifically sees them in Andhra Pradesh, a southern state, whose capital city, Hyderabad, has the largest Muslim population in the country. Whenever Naipaul describes scenes of "filth," "dirt," and "excrement," his gaze is directed at non-brahminic Others. Andhra Pradesh is also known for its Naxalites who militantly oppose the brahminic state (Tully 2012, 4-5).

[45] Writers like Girish Karnad, Githa Hariharan, and Taslima Nasrin criticized Naipaul for his anti-nonbrahminic stances (see Supriya 2012; see also footnote 43). Naipaul wrote with great sympathy about the Vijayanagar Kingdom, a Hindu Kingdom (Naipaul 1964, 215; 1977, 13-18). However, he saw the more than the 1,000-year Mughal rule in India merely as a long, brutal sequence of pillage that damaged India (Dalrymple 2004, paras. 4-12).

about Gandhi, Nehru, Chaudhary, and even the lowly mattress-maker in his book *The Writer and the World*, Untouchables do not appear. A similar pattern unravels in Gandhi and Narayan. Such glaring absence or deliberate erasure of Untouchables from discourse suggests the anti-democratic stance inherent in the caste system.

In *The Human Condition* ([1958] 1998), Hannah Arendt offers the notion of a "table" that enables discussion, negotiation, coalition, debate, not only to minimize or prevent conflicts but also to attain positive, progressive changes. This metaphorical table, Arendt suggests, orients those who sit around it: "[A]s a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time" ([1958] 1998, 52). Arendt thus suggests a model of coalition discourse that can co-articulate difference and commonality, a space for interaction that neither relies on sameness nor reifies difference to the exclusion of connection. However, any community that practices untouchability can only pretend to engage with Arendt's table, which is essentially a model for democracy. In a brahminic context, Arendt's table would not work because caste is incompatible with the democratic setup it proposes. What Arendt's table espouses is the antithesis of the caste principle of inequality on which caste communities are built. Consequently, when Naipaul discusses anonymous, impoverished Indians, he deals with them as abstractions and narrates them with an anti-Dalit slant, thus making it impossible for Arendt's table to work**.** Only when he engages with upper-caste people does Arendt's table serve its function. By marking outcasts as Untouchables, Naipaul, like most members of the upper castes, exhausts the possibilities that Arendt's table offers. When Naipaul recalls his family servant, the mattress-maker in *The Writer and the World*, he displays his brahminic "way of looking":

> I tried to make my questions as small as possible. I asked what he remembered most about India. He thought about it for some time and said, 'There was a railway station.' That was all I could get out of him.
>
> […]. He did not have the analytical faculty; life and the world, so to speak, constantly went in one eye and out of the other. And I feel sure it would have been the same with other old India-born people whom we failed to question about the past. (2007, 84-85)

Not only does Naipaul conclude quickly that the mattress-maker has no analytical faculty, he is convinced that all other old India-born people might have answered in a similar way. Although Naipaul can hardly speak the mattress-maker's language, nor does the mattress-maker know a word of English, Naipaul, with full brahminic conviction, claims that the mattress-maker cannot assess "life and the world." Naipaul stresses his dedication and day-long hard work, not as a compliment

but only to strengthen his previous claim that the mattress-maker has no analytical faculty. Naipaul's views about the mattress-maker reflect his hubris in terms of caste and colonialism, an example of double pride. While Naipaul's family lives on the upper floor, the mattress-maker lives alone on the ground floor, working from early morning until sunset. Also, Naipaul's question suggests that even as a child he has learned what not to see. A child's question, "What do you remember most about India?" seems adult. It has no personal dimension, no interest in the man. The child poses no child-like questions (do you have any children? where is your wife? why are you alone?). Several decades later Naipaul remembers his question and the mattress-maker's answer. Here, one recalls Naipaul's observation concerning a starved Indian child defecating, a mangy dog awaiting to consume the child's excrement, and the scene's attendant complexities. Although with regard to the mattress-maker there is no mangy dog around, nor a starved child's excrement, his answer to the child's (Naipaul's) question is put to brahminic use six decades later by Naipaul, the writer. After discussing the mattress-maker, Naipaul comes to Rahim Khan's book, *The Autobiography of an Indian Indentured laborer.*[46] By reading Rahim Khan's book closely, Naipaul compares him to the untouchable-like, ever-silent mattress-maker and, briefly, to Gandhi in a way that implies a colonial and caste hierarchy. As an imperialist, Naipaul sees all of them as men lacking in analytical thinking. As a brahminic writer, he seems far more sympathetic to Gandhi while he denigrates the mattress maker and mocks Rahim Khan. While Naipaul discusses upper-caste men such as Gandhi, Nehru, and Chaudhary and lower-caste men such as the mattress-maker and Rahim Khan, he completely disregards Untouchables. The table that Arendt proposes becomes a brahminic table in the hands of brahminic Naipaul, prohibiting Untouchables lest they pollute it with their "wasted," "starved," "devolving" bodies, carrying their own or others' excrement, followed by "mangy dogs."

Compared to the mattress-maker, Naipaul is more sympathetic toward Rahim Khan: "He has much more to say than my grandmother's mattress-maker but, as a narrator he has something of the mattress-maker's incompleteness. He has no feeling about the physical world about him" (Naipaul 2007, 88). Naipaul here compares Rahim Khan to the mattress-maker, but he maintains that only the former has an analytical faculty. By calling him by his name, Naipaul reveals his brahminic bias and goes on to tell the story of Rahim Khan's journey from India to Trinidad, recounting his failures, fantasies, and erasures:

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[46] Munshi Rahim Khan's book was written in Hindi, entitled *Jeevan Prakash* (The Light of Life). It was first translated into Dutch and then into English and given the "sensational" title of *The Autobiography of an Indian Indentured Laborer* (mentioned in Naipaul 2007, 87).

> He was full of the idea of his religious learning, his knowledge (though a Muslim) of the *Ramayana* of India; he felt himself to be the equal of a Brahmin. He never in the course of his long life went beyond this little learning; and he sank without unhappiness into the Surinam bush, cherishing his village glory to the end. (Naipaul 2007, 100)

Both Rahim Khan and the mattress-maker—one without any "analytic faculty" and the other with his "incompleteness" and without much idea "about the physical world"—lack the ability to assess themselves, and when they do, their assessments seem inadequate to Naipaul. Rahim Khan remains trapped in events related to wonder, magic, fantasy, and maladies and their cures, whereas the mattress-maker remains locked in his muteness. With their minimal learning and skills (unlike Naipaul's), they sink "into the Surinam bush." (Naipaul tells the reader that Rahim Khan is a Muslim, which is obvious from the name, and then adds, as if surprised, that he knows the *Ramayana* and considers himself to be "the equal of a Brahmin.") Naipaul's account of Rahim Khan and the mattress-maker emerges as a brahminic reading of lower castes.

The Trinidadian Naipaul, formed by non-Indian contexts and, with no knowledge of Indian languages, neatly as though instinctively categorizes these various people along caste lines. It is the non-brahminic India that invites Naipaul's harshest criticism. His approach takes on a celebratory tone when he describes his family and upper-caste people in general. The "static," "barbaric," non-brahminic India recedes and the Naipaulian critique loses its pointedness while the pro-brahminic shift in mood, tone, and pitch goes unnoticed. Naipaul seems to approve of English-speaking, upper-caste, middle- and upper-middle-class Indians, but he recoils from the "deficient," non-brahminic masses such as Dalits and Muslims (Naipaul 1964, 45-46). This happens because caste shaped Naipaul's early childhood. In *A Writer's People* (2007), Naipaul wrote, "The India we had come from couldn't be forgotten. It permeated our lives. In religion, rituals, festivals, much of our sacred calendar, and even in our social ideas, India lived on, even when the language began to be forgotten" (80). Only in his later work does Naipaul explicitly talk about the centrality of Hindu influences on him as a writer. The Ramlila, the pageant-play based on the epic *Ramayana*, that he saw as a child made a strong impression on him. To Naipaul, the epic has "a strong and fast and rich narrative" and is a great source of "moral education" ([2003] 2011, 8). Like Gandhi and Narayan, Naipaul emphasizes the centrality of the *Ramayana* in Hindu life: "Everyone around me would have known the story at least in outline; some people knew some of the actual verses. I didn't have to be taught it: the story of Rama's unjust banishment to the dangerous forest was like something I had always known" (8). The Trinidadian and anglicized Naipaul goes on to make a

striking claim that "[i]t lay below the writing I was to get to know later in the city […]" (8), which obliquely suggests the influence of caste on him.

In his biographical essays and interviews, Naipaul frequently referred to his Western education and wrote profoundly about Conrad, Proust, and Nabokov, but the early brahminic influences that shaped him appeared only as footnotes in his writing. Only in his later writing such as *Literary Occasions* ([2003] 2011) does he specifically mention the indelible impression that the *Ramayana* made on him when he first encountered it as a young boy (8)**.** However, he also says that, after that initial contact, he lost touch with the text, which meant he never pursued it actively. However, such disconnection with a seminal text does not necessarily dilute the text's cultural significance and its impact on the subconscious. Even within India, such a disconnection from important cultural texts is possible, but it is impossible to bypass a text like the *Ramayana* completely. Despite his claim of deracination, like all staunch Brahmins who worship the *Ramayana* (as it sanctions Brahminism), Naipaul too favors such texts, which puts him in the same brahminic category as Narayan and Gandhi, both of whom assign pride of place to the *Ramayana* in their writing. Although Naipaul was born long after his family had left India, had stopped using their native language, and no longer included any living members who knew India firsthand, the essence of that lost India survived in him through the everyday Hindu practices and rituals that his parents observed.[47] His connection with the slowly disappearing India was second-hand, but it was, nevertheless, a connection. The diverse world outside did not make any significant difference to their Hindu way of life at home—it "lived on" (Naipaul 2007, 80). Naipaul's father frequently gave him well-meaning and yet seemingly esoteric advice to "keep your centre" (1999, 19, 32), and Naipaul did, always keeping it, holding on to it. These various strands suggest that caste touched on every aspect of Naipaul's early life which is why Naipaul sees the world only in the binaries of civilized-barbaric, high-low, western-eastern stemming from the ontological binary of touchable-untouchable.

However, because of Naipaul's unique location and his propensity to hold on to the "center," instances showing his brahminic and orientalist attitude overlap, indicating his complex attitude toward upper-caste Indians, including his distant relatives. When Naipaul's mother visited her ancestral village in India for the first time, she was hugely disappointed. Naipaul notes: "There they

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[47] Naipaul mentioned the impact of caste rituals on him in his childhood. He also stressed his alienation from his native language and religion as he grew older. Naipaul wrote about seeing the *Ramayana* being staged as a child (Naipaul [2003] 2011, 7-8). His writing implies that such were minor or isolated experiences whose influence waned and ultimately disappeared as he grew up. However, Trinidad has a thriving Indian presence and well before Naipaul was born the Indian community was culturally active. People of other religions were well-acquainted with the staging of the *Ramayana* in Trinidad. See Riggio (2010) and Walcott (1992).

all fell on her, the relations of eighty or a hundred years before […] They offered food, but my mother was sufficiently far away from India to be nervous of food in that crowded village" (Naipaul 2007, 125). Naipaul gives a striking description of his Brahmin relatives' 'manners.'

> The tea at length appeared, a murky dark colour, in a small white china cup. The lady offering the cup, for the greater courtesy and the better show, wiped the side of the cup with the palm of her hand. And then someone from these relations of a hundred years before remembered that sugar had to be offered with tea. My mother said it didn't matter. But the grey grains of sugar came on somebody's palm and were slid from the palm into the tea. And that person, courteous to the end, began to stir the sugar with her finger.
>
> This was where my mother ended her journal entry about her visit to her father's ancestral village. She ended in midsentence**,** unable to face that sugar-stirring finger in the cup of tea. The land of myth, of a perfection that at one time had seemed vanished and unreachable, had robbed her of words. (Naipaul 2007, 125-126)

Her nostalgia for the great Indian past lost its spell when her impoverished relatives in her ancestral village offered her a cup of tea. After lambasting his poor but brahminic relatives for their shabby manners, Naipaul wrote with horror about the way in which one of their relatives served his mother tea. There was nothing more reprehensible that Naipaul and his mother could have imagined (Naipaul's mother's diary entries end with the tea scene, and so does Naipaul's account in the book). Naipaul's village relatives seemed repulsive to the 'foreigner' in mother and son. It is not immediately apparent how and why the Brahmins of his clan became so uncouth, while the village Brahmins like the Naipauls who left India for Trinidad as "bonded labourers" retained their cultural purity (Trivedi 2008, 19). Without being present at the scene, Naipaul draws the "sugar-stirring fingers" of his distant relations in a way that makes them look like Naipaul's "men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing" (1979, 1).

However, elsewhere, while commenting on his family's history of emigration, Naipaul states, "[I]t would have been possible for the civilization to be reconstructed, more than is possible for the Mayan and the Etruscan. So in one way it cannot be said that the immigrants brought little from India: they brought their civilization" (Naipaul 2007, 81). In contrast to his immediate family members who, despite their emigration, remained touchable and clean, and more importantly, retained their sense of themselves, Naipaul's village relatives who remained in India became culturally impoverished and alien, which suggests that poverty of means translates, invariably, into

cultural poverty. Considering such brahminic cultural dynamics, Naipaul's description of his relatives, bordering on the scatological, becomes problematic because he either exaggerates the virtues of his immediate family in Trinidad or misrepresents his brahminic relatives in India.

In the Indian context, his aversive gaze reflects the contempt that the Anglophile brahminic elite show toward Indian masses, irrespective of their caste and class status. When Naipaul looks at India as a Westerner, his brahminic gaze takes a back seat. Commenting on the autobiographies of Indian expatriates (all upper-caste) such as Gandhi, Nehru, and Chaudhari, he observes that Indians do not see what is around them. In his opinion, even though all these Indians have spent considerable time in Western cities, they have ignored them in their writing. How could Indian autobiographers be so indifferent to the civilizational splendor of England's cities? Naipaul connects this "not seeing" with a certain kind of backwardness, rooted in India's "static" history. He feels particularly astonished by Gandhi's indifference to England:

> In my thirties, when India was independent and Gandhi himself long dead, I could read the book [Gandhi's autobiography] as a book. I saw its strange deficiencies; the absence of landscape, the extraordinarily narrow view of England and London in 1888-91: no attempt to describe the great city that must surely have overwhelmed the young man from Rajkot, no theatres or music halls, everything disappearing in his quest for vegetarian food and in his wish to stay faithful to the three vows he had made to his mother before leaving Rajkot: no meat, no alcohol, no women. (Naipaul 2007, 101)

In the same vein Naipaul criticizes Nehru's autobiography: "He has very little to report about London or Harrow or Cambridge; much less, in fact, than Gandhi has to say about London twenty-five years before. In Nehru's account these places are just their names. It is very strange" (2007, 118). Naipaul seems genuinely puzzled by Gandhi and Nehru's indifference toward English cities.

Although Naipaul's observation is astute, his interpretation is misleading. In his ardent wish to understand these expatriate Indians, he reveals complex dimensions of his own personality, what Harish Trivedi calls Naipaul's "deeply commingled and confused world" (2008, 19). Unlike him, all these other Indians have been raised in a brahminic-centered world and thus they do not understand or respond to racially diverse societies or even racism. Naipaul, on the other hand, despite his protected Hindu upbringing, was intimately aware of the racial hierarchies of Trinidad and England (Naipaul 2004, 68). As a Europeanist, Naipaul expects a token acknowledgment of London's 'superiority' from other upper-caste men visiting England such as Nehru, Gandhi, and Chaudhary.

Implicit in Naipaul's complaint is his own sense of internalized imperial superiority that leaves him baffled when 'inferior' Indians do not respond to the racialized west. Naipaul fails to realize that the politics of racial difference has as little significance for an Indian as the practice of untouchability has for a Westerner visiting or living in India. Unlike him, the three Indians under discussion do not have hybrid identities in the sense that Naipaul might have, nor do they respond to racial hierarchies of Europe in ways Naipaul expects them to. A Westerner living in India might be discriminated against in a caste sense, but such discrimination would not make the practice of untouchability real to him as his world hinges on a race-based hierarchy. The brahminic indifference he perceives in upper-caste Nehru and Gandhi has less to do with London and more to do with caste**.**

To show how the centrality of caste in Indian life blurs other forms of discrimination such as racism based on skin color in non-Indian contexts, I refer briefly to Vikram Seth's *Two Live*s ([2005]2006) and Caryl Phillips' *Colour Me English* (2011*)*. Seth's novel, *Two Lives*, gives a biographical account of his uncle Shanti who went to Germany to study dentistry in the 1920s, fell in love with a Jewish girl, Henny, and escaped with her to England. Although affected by the Nazi regime, Shanti hardly talks about the Nazis or racism. When Seth does confront Shanti about Hitler's Germany, he says that "he never felt excluded as a foreigner: his teachers treated him well and he was invited to the homes of some of his German fellow students" ([2005] 2006), 93). Also, drawing upon his brother's and his own experiences of overt racism in contemporary England, Seth himself finds England to be "intolerant of intolerance" (394). Seth does not dramatize his uncle's life in Berlin in the 1920s, or his own life in England several decades later. What emerges in the 500-page-long book is that neither in Shanti's life nor in Seth's own experience of living in the West does racism transpire with the same force it assumes in critical race narratives. Obliquely, the centrality of caste that we see in Seth's account of his uncle's life also emerges in Caryl Phillips' autobiographical essay, "Color Me English." The young black child narrator notes that although he is bullied like his Pakistani classmate Ali, their situation is different. Unlike Ali who disappears in his "language and religion" after school, he is English in every way except for his color; there is no place where he can "hide from the English" (Phillips 2011, 7). If one takes a broader view of history, these Pakistani boys like Ali are culturally Indians, and like upper-caste Hindus they practice caste (Dewan 2019, 136; Patnaik 2020, paras. 1-4). What the black boy sees is the working of caste, although he has no name for it.

The black-child narrator's confusion at Ali's family unravels in Naipaul's essay on Derek Walcott. Even though both Naipaul and Walcott are Trinidadians, Naipaul insists that Walcot cannot access his world. The way Naipaul describes himself and Walcott can be compared with the black-boy narrator and Ali, the former as Walcott and the latter as Naipaul. Naipaul emphasizes that

Walcott's world is not his: "I don't think in Trinidad we felt as children that we walked in a liberating beauty, like Walcott's black children; perhaps we felt the opposite" (21). The idea of blackness that is central to Walcott's work means nothing to Naipaul. For Naipaul, the world outside his family and community is merely a "wilderness." This outside wilderness hardly mattered to him or even to his father about whose work he writes: "In my father's early stories the other races do not appear" (31). About his own early childhood influences, Naipaul says that in Trinidad he grew up in "a transplanted peasant India" (42). That India felt whole to him and it gave him a special feeling: "This base of feeling has lasted all my life. I think it is true to say that, in the beginning, living in this unusual India, I saw people of other groups but at the same time didn't see them" (42). It is his family and brahminic community, not Trinidad, that greatly moved and dazzled him with its stories and rituals based on the epic *Ramayana.* When Caryl Phillips's narrator talks about the protective layer that Ali's family seems to provide Ali and into which he disappears, Naipaul's example offers the anatomy of Ali-like families.

However, this centrality of caste surfaces differently in the experiences of brahminic and Dalit Indians in non-brahminic locations and cultures, although both ways affirm the centrality of caste. In *Ants Among Elephants* (2018)*,* Sujatha Gidla, a Dalit woman, now living in New York with her American boyfriend, wrote about her experiences of growing up as an 'Untouchable' in south India. Only after moving to the United States does she realize that her life stories that "were not stories in India" are stories "worth telling […] worth writing down" (Gidla 2018, 3). She writes, "Only in talking to some friends I met here did I realize that my stories, my family's stories, are not stories of shame" (5). Despite such an epiphanic realization and even after living in the United States for several years, she continues to feel haunted by caste. She fears polluting her American boyfriend by her touch: If he ever reaches for her cup to drink from it, she impulsively snatches the cup from him (Gidla 2018).[48] Such is the grip of untouchability on her.[49] Although she lives in New York where she is a racial minority, she feels imprisoned by caste, not race. She likely encountered racial prejudice in some form in the United States, but as a Dalit woman, she only recognizes and responds to caste-based prejudices**.** Inversely**,** both Dalits and upper castes show how much their lives are rooted in caste even in non-brahminic locations. Unlike them, Naipaul's confusion arises because he is shaped by both racial and brahminic ideologies, and he responds to the politics of touch and color, depending upon his need and location.

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[48] Sujatha Gidla said this in a talk with Regina Gisbertz at Haus der Berliner Festspiele on September 13, 2018.

[49] A Dalit person faces caste discrimination within the Indian diaspora (Adur and Narayan 2017, 244-264).

Recently, when the veteran Indian playwright Girish Karnad was questioning Naipaul's critique of Muslim rule in India, he was actually criticizing Naipaul's Brahminism. Karnad argued that Naipaul never acknowledged the enormous contribution of Muslims to Indian music and other performing arts (quoted in Nair 2012, para. 6). Tabish Khair (2001, 244) argues that Naipaul's severed connection with India, his upbringing in Trinidad, and, more importantly, his ignorance of any of the Indian languages make his views on India derivative (Khair 2001, 244). However, Naipaul's denunciation of Muslims is not accidental. Naipaul's letters[50] and biographical essays show that he holds Muslims responsible for India's degeneration (Dalrymple 2004, para. 4). Naipaul's fictional and non-fictional works shift between the brahminic and colonial points of view. In his imperial avatar, through one character, one incident, he would make statements about non-Western people and their cultures, steeped in borderline racism. In the Indian context, he differentiates brahminic and non-brahminic India. Many subtle 'R. K. Narayans' are hidden in Naipaul. While his Western critics applaud Naipaul and his brahminic critics denounce him, they miss the brahminic dimensions of his work.[51] Despite his overt Brahminism, Naipaul continues to be admired as a "visionary" in the West while being perceived as a "racist" in India. Both the cheering West and angry Indians seem to miss the pro-brahminic core of his work.[52]

Beyond Naipaul's writing, pro-brahminic tendencies seem integral to Indian writings in English—the characters, subject matter, and themes primarily reflect brahminic lives. Such portrayals are not necessarily anti-Dalit, but they configure Indian lives as brahminic. Dalits rarely appear as Dalits; they become kaamwalis, drivers, malis, safai-karamcharis. Even upper-caste women writers such as Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Manju Kapoor have focused predominantly on the lives of upper-caste, upper-middle-class, and English-speaking women like themselves, thus maintaining a sacrosanct upper-caste space through a hegemonic discourse that "excludes women of marginalized social classes, ethnicities, and sexualities" (Puri 1999, xi). One cannot blame writers if caste influences every sphere of social life, but its very

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[50] No account of Hindustani classical music, instrumental or vocal, can be given without considering the enormous contribution of Muslims. Naipaul definitely knew this. His sister formally studied Sitar in Banaras in the early 1950s. (1999, 15-17, 141, 233-234).

[51] Whereas critics like Edward Said, Nissim Ezekiel, and Tabish Khair criticized Naipaul for his eurocentrism, Western writers such as Elizabeth Hardwick, Bruce King, Irving Howe found his writing vivid and vital. Members of the Swedish Academy (2001) considered him to be a "modern *philosophe*" who has "united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories." Such extreme reactions oversimplify Naipaul's work and obscure its caste dimension.

[52] It is no coincidence that Naipaul supported the right-wing *Bharatiya Janata Party*. On December 6, 1992, when Hindu mobs (with the full support of right-wing Hindu politicians and ideologues) demolished the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, supposed to have been built on top of the birthplace of Lord Rama, Naipaul condoned it, saying it "was an act of historical balancing […] a sort of passion […]. I always support actions coming out of passion as these reflect creativity" (Hasan 2016, para. 13).

selective textual depiction strengthens the prevailing status quo and thus the cycle of caste continues. Makarand Paranjape has termed the Indian English novel as "necessarily 'dwija' [upper-caste]" (1991, 2299). We see that the "dwija" dimension of the Indian English novel is not limited to the novel. Rather, it spills over to other forms of Indian writings in English. Despite the different nature of their writings, Gandhi, Narayan, and Naipaul share a pro-brahminic approach, shaped by the *Ramayana.* Gandhi, who embodies Brahminism, epitomizes Rama and Buddha, and who adopts conventional Hindu practices in his everyday life, is central to Narayan's and Naipaul's literary imagination. Brahminic writers like Narayan and Naipaul do not have to rely directly on the ancient Sanskrit texts. Instead, they disseminate Brahminism through the figure of Gandhi, and thus the narration of caste continues, benefitting upper castes and oppressing Dalits.

4. Anti-Brahminic Voices: Cogs in the Brahminic Wheel

In contrast to brahminic writers, anti-brahminic writers challenge the ways by which Brahminism is constituted. They either repudiate or question whatever appears sacred to brahminic writers. Sanskrit texts such as the *Ramayana*, the figure of Gandhi, and explicit ideas of caste either do not appear or are given a different spin in anti-brahminic writing. In 1934, Dr. Ambedkar, a Dalit leader, demanded that upper-caste Hindus discard those religious texts that preach caste. He also sought equal rights for women through amendments to the Indian constitution, so that inter-caste marriage could become a social reality. However, his demands seemed too radical to upper-caste liberal reformers and simply preposterous to orthodox Brahmins and were thus rejected (Ambedkar [1936] 2014, 187-203). Ambedkar's anti-caste struggles are still relevant to present-day India. By using a range of anti-brahminic texts and events and controversies surrounding these texts, I will examine the ways in which anti-brahminic writers foil pro-caste narratives.

When Saleem Kidwai and Ruth Vanita were looking for publishers for their groundbreaking book, *Same-sex love in India: Readings from History and Literature* (2001)*,* no major publisher wanted to publish it due to its supposedly anti-Indian cultural content. The co-author Kidwai said that their book "was published through the back door by Macmillan, a textbook publisher, because no mainstream publisher would publish us" (quoted in Bhan 2007, 54). Although publishers reportedly liked the book, they were hesitant to publish it as they feared Hindu right-wing organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.[53]

[53] Some texts that I have discussed in my thesis have been either banned or denounced by right-wing Hindu groups. These are V.S. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness (*1964*)*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Joseph Lelyveld *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India* (2011)*,* and Wendy Doniger's *The Hindu: An Alternate History* (2009). In recent years, with the rise of Hindutva politics, writers, artists, and filmmakers who challenge the brahminic order are increasingly persecuted (Roy 2020, 105: Ramachandran 2020, 15-20).

They were also unsure about the public's response to the book. However, after the book was "published abroad with good reviews and no controversy" (55), it was published in India and found its place in Indian LGBT history. The initial opposition to the book indicates the reality of post-global India struggling with the issue of (non-normative) sexuality and thus caste.

It is not only in the publishing industry that brahminic prejudices surface in bizarre ways. Gopal Gandhi is accused of deliberately erasing caste from his Hindi translation *Koi Accha Sa Ladka* (1998) of Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy* (1993). In Seth's novel, the upper-caste characters walk through a stinking Dalit slum strewn with carcasses covered in blood. In a novel that exceeds 1,000 pages, the Chamar-caste[54] slum is quickly glossed over. Whereas Seth's narrative describes the industrial and technical aspect of shoemaking, it ignores the significant role that Chamars—hereditary leather workers who are seen as Untouchables—play in shoemaking (Seth 1993, 203, 576-577). Seth might have writerly constraints, but his translator Gopal Gandhi had no reason to erase the Chamar slum which appeared in the original from his Hindi translation *Koi Accha Sa Ladka* (Gandhi 1998, 248, 269). When Gopal Gandhi was challenged about the issue, his sole defense was that he erased the scene for aesthetic reasons (for more details see Sadana 2012, 136-152). Gopal Gandhi knew that his upper-caste readers would appreciate an aesthetic sensibility that practices Dalit negation.

The brahminic erasure of anti-caste discourse has a long history in modern Indian literature and politics. In nineteenth-century India, upper-caste nationalist reformers arranged and categorized literature in ways that privileged heterosexuality and pro-caste texts while suppressing any expression of non-normative sexuality and/or anti-caste ideas. They paid lip service to the idea of equality without giving up on caste. Whereas the world was changing rapidly, India remained stuck in the web of caste well into the twentieth century. In 1924, when the Hindi language writer Pandey Bechan Sharma, also known by his pen name 'Ugra'[55] wrote *Chacklet* (Chocolate)—a book of short stories about urban gay men in India—he was reprimanded by his fellow brahminic writers for addressing homosexuality.[56] One of his colleagues said to him, "Enough of this topic! To hell with chocolate and its discussion. When the whole society prefers to keep quiet about this subject, why

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[54] The term Chamar is derived from the Sanskrit word "Charma' meaning leather. One who works with leather is called a Chamar. Within Untouchable castes, it is considered one of the lowest.

[55] The name "Ugra" is intriguing. It means "Extreme/Violent" (Vanita 2014, 3). Ruth Vanita links the word to Sharma's homosexuality, or the theme of homosexuality in his work. But Ugra is also described as *mleccha* (Untouchable) in caste taxonomy. Those marked as Ugras were viewed as "Candalas," or demonic Untouchables (see Thapar 1978, 157). By calling himself Ugra, Sharma seems to embrace his "extremities" in both a caste and a sexual sense.

[56] Pandey Bechan Sharma (Ugra) wrote his collection of short stories "Chacklet" in 1924. I refer to Ruth Vanita's 2009b English translation of Ugra's book entitled *Chocolate and Other Writings on Male Homoeroticism,* published by Duke University Press.

are you so intent on playing with fire?" (Sharma 2009, 7). Ugra claimed that he wanted to expose the all-pervasive 'vice' of homosexuality that was destroying young men in urban India. However, Ugra's defense did not convince his upper-caste colleagues. They warned him against writing about homosexuality**,** framing their objections from a pro-caste angle. In such discussions, the mere idea of a homosexual man came to mirror that of an Untouchable, thus evoking feelings of revulsion in upper-caste discussants. Despite the intense questioning of his real motives by his colleagues, Ugra maintained that he wanted to expose the Western vice of homosexuality which he claimed had spread in Indian cities like an epidemic. Considering the highly charged nationalist movement with its focus on ultra patriarchal ideals, Ugra's justification was the only way to publicize the issue of homosexuality. By claiming that he was trying to save Indian culture, Ugra was actually talking about minority sexualities. One of his critics pointedly asked him why he had titled his book *Chacklet* (Chocolate) and not "Ghaslet" (Gasoline). Ugra could not answer that question convincingly because he had indeed depicted homosexuality in an attractive light. Chocolate, though foreign, has never been a taboo food in India. Dairy products such as milk-based sweets have always been a part of the Indian diet. By using the trope of a delicacy like chocolate, was Ugra suggesting the universality of homosexuality? (Vanita 2014, 5).

In fact, Ugra's strategy of addressing homosexuality is reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's means of dealing with it three decades before the publication of *Chacklet*.[57] Although Wilde presented homosexuality in a heteronormative framework, his male characters were, for the most part, seen as enjoying each other's company, playing, flirting, and talking about things that intimated the nature of their friendships, and only toward the end of his plays do his queer characters become straight and marry women. Like Wilde, Ugra showed urban men living radically different lives outside the confines of the family, "acting like conventional romantic lovers—pining, sighing, composing and reciting poetry, offering gifts, and pursuing the beloved" (Vanita 2009b, xxxvii). Only at the end of his stories do some of his male characters suffer or die because of sexually transmitted diseases (xxxix). Although Ugra was not Wilde, he adopted Wilde's strategy of making political gestures by producing, circulating and divulging the otherwise unspeakable life experiences of homosexual men in urban India. Despite Ugra's efforts, brahminic India deflected his intervention by responding in a way that rather enhanced homophobia.[58]

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[57] Gandhi read and liked both Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and Urga's *Chacklet*. However, Ugra's colleague, a well-known upper-caste Hindi writer, told Ugra that Gandhi disliked the book. He intended to dissuade Ugra from writing about homosexuals.

[58] Even in present-day India, when teaching about authors like Oscar Wilde, W.H. Auden, and Christopher Isherwood, teachers do not mention the sexual orientation of these authors. Shakespearian poems addressed by men to their male lovers are studied in a cross-gender fashion (see Vanita 2011). Western writers who presented India in a pleasant light are taught widely, whereas those who engaged with

Upper-caste communities continue to combat anti-brahminic ideas and writers like Ugra; it does not matter whether such ideas are erupting from within the country or coming from the outside. The question of non-normative sexualities becomes even more problematic for it is taken as a direct assault on Brahminism. Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) was a striking example. Orthodox Hindus vandalized cinema halls that showed the film across India (Nath 2016, paras. 16-17).[59] The source of upper-caste anxiety and hostility was that the film depicted two women having sex and that, more momentously, they were named after the Hindu goddesses Radha and Sita. In another incident, in 2009 when the Delhi High Court decriminalized homosexuality in India, the religious heads of all major and minor religions, who seldom agree on anything, opposed the decision jointly.[60] They feared that unregulated sexuality would damage the very basis of the social order based on hierarchies and the idea of caste purity, and thus the upper-caste privileges that emanate from caste would disappear.

Along similar lines to the anti-brahminic writers and artists discussed above, Arundhati Roy's work deconstructs the brahminic utopia that writers such as Gandhi, Narayan, and Naipaul perpetuate. Roy's explicit anti-brahminic stance makes her work central to my thesis. When in her first novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), Roy addressed the issue of caste, her critics pointed out that her depiction of a cross-caste love story is "highly improbable" and "cosmetic" (Khair 2001, 142), that it is "not only overwritten, it is overwrought [and] aesthetically contrived" (quoted in Cooper 1997, para. 14), and that it eventually reinforces caste. However, not many Indian writers in English, knowing the enormity of the caste system, have confronted caste in the way Roy did in her two novels and in her non-fiction work. I argue that her work adds to the anti-brahminic discourse. Roy's anti-brahminic standpoint advances further when she places a hijra character at the center of her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). Whereas hijras are ubiquitous in India, they rarely appear in popular culture except as objects of ridicule**,** and since Roy humanizes their stories, her depiction of hijra characters is unprecedented in Indian writings in English. Also, because Roy has consistently assumed an anti-brahminic position, her upper-caste critics call her naive, implying that she is not qualified to write about complex topics such as caste, politics, economics, globalization, and the environment (Dougal 2010; Guha 2010; Joseph 2010). However, her upper-caste male critics do not respond to her work, because responding to it would

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anti-caste ideas pertaining to desire and equality are excluded from school and university curricula.

[59] For a more detailed discussion about the controversy Deepa Mehta's film caused in India, see Patel (2002, 222-243).

[60] Every time (2009, 2013, 2018) the Indian High Court or Supreme Court delivers a verdict, the religious heads of various communities, who do not agree on anything, condemn the decision if the verdict is perceived as pro LGBT and celebrate it if it is against LGBT people. See, Banakar (2018) and "Delhi High Court.," (2009).

imply acknowledging their caste privileges. Roy's brahminic critics often seem to be criticizing her work for its anti-caste politics since the issues she raises are directly or obliquely connected to the caste system. The entire trajectory of Roy's work from her first published essay "The Great Indian Rape-Trick" (1994), to the publication of *The God of Small Things* in 1997, to her most recent essay on Covid 19, "The Pandemic is Portal" (2020), demonstrates her anti-caste politics. As a result, the state institutions that should protect her instead threaten her. A male High Court judge dismissively referred to her as "that woman" who does not behave like a "reasonable man" (Roy 2018, para. 1). Not only does such behavior betray casual misogyny, it reveals how caste attitudes permeate secular spaces**,** such as judicial courts**,** in India (Roy 2014, 19-20, 109; 2007).

Roy is not the only Indian author who has questioned caste. Unlike most Indian writers in English, Indian writers in vernacular languages have tackled caste more realistically. Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) engaged with urgent socio-cultural issues with great equanimity "combining social purpose and artistic excellence" (Chandra 1982, 601). In this section, I want to analyze in some detail Premchand's short story, "Kafan" (The Shroud)*,*[61] which depicts the way Brahminism functions in rural India, intertwining with issues such as Dalit labor, gender subordination within Dalit families, and feudalism whose only motive was making a profit not aiding the general welfare of the villagers. Premchand's village was not a Gandhian village utopia, nor were his Brahmin and Dalit characters simply angelic or demonic. Ghisu and his son Madhav are daily wage earners of the Chamar (Dalit) caste. Since they are not paid adequately, and their value is measured in terms of their "utility to the dominant class" (Banik 2009, 182), they only work when it is essential. On the surface, Premchand depicts Ghisu and Madhav as immoral, but he connects their "bestiality" to the "hypocrisy" of upper-caste villagers (Mukherjee 1994, 147).

When the story opens, Ghisu and Madhav are seen lying under a tree. Madhav's pregnant wife, Budhiya, has been sick for some days. They have nothing in the hut except potatoes which they roast and eat, but they remain completely oblivious to Budhiya who eventually dies. The two then go out into the village and ask for help to perform last rites for Budhiya. The upper-caste villagers would never have helped Ghisu and Madhav in other circumstances, but when they hear about Budhiya's death, they give them money. Surprised at this unexpected charity, Ghisu says, "What a bad custom it is that someone who didn't even get a rag to cover her body when she was alive, needs a new shroud when she's dead" (Premchand [1936] 2004, 3a, para. 5). They also regret the hypocrisy of the upper-caste villagers: "If we'd had these five rupees earlier, we would have given her some medicine" (para. 7). Once they collect enough money and go out into the bazaar,

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[61] Premchand wrote "Kafan" in 1936. I use Frances W. Pritchett's 2004 English translation titled "The Shroud."

they show the same kind of ruthlessness toward the dead Budhiya as they had shown toward the living one. They spend all of their money on sweets and drinks. Intoxicated, they thank Budhiya because she brings them pleasure even through her death. Both laugh "at this unexpected good fortune, at defeating destiny in this way. Madhav said, "She was very good, the poor thing. Even as she died, she gave us a fine meal" (3b, para. 7). The story becomes dark and depressive, but it depicts the inhumanity of both Dalits and upper castes. Daan (charity) and karma also play a key role in the story, reproducing caste order. While villagers help Ghisu and Madhav, they in turn give food to a beggar on the street, saying, "Take it—eat your fill, and give her your blessing. She whose earnings these are has died, but your blessing will certainly reach her. Bless her with every hair on your body—these are the payment for very hard labor" (3d, para. 4). While this is going on, Madhav looks toward the sky and says, "She'll go to Heaven—she'll become the Queen of Heaven!" (para. 5). Their belief in an afterlife, daan**,** and karma is as developed as that of their upper-caste counterparts. While upper-caste villagers and Chamars live in strict segregation, commercial activities take precedence over caste-related proprieties in the bazaar. Neither in the Chamar area, nor where upper-caste families live, but in a neutral place like the bazaar is where Ghisu and Madhav indulge in transgressive behavior: "The whole wine-house was absorbed in the spectacle, and these two drinkers, deep in intoxication, kept on singing. Then they both began to dance—they leaped and jumped, fell down, flounced about, gesticulated […] and finally, overcome by drunkenness, they collapsed" (3e, para. 5). In their intoxication, father and son are no longer father and son but become simply two drunk men, no longer heeding the proprieties of caste. Indeed, their dance and banter even give the scene a homoerotic edge.

Although "The Shroud" captures the everyday reality of caste and highlights the exploitation of Dalit labor by upper-caste villagers, Dalit writers have denounced it for its ignominious depiction of Dalits.[62] Whereas brahminic and anti-brahminic writers may have opposing opinions on the pro- or anti-Dalit aspects of this story written in 1936, they completely missed the point raised by Dalit writer Dharamveer in his book *Premchand: Samant ka Munshi.*

> The whole story would become newly clear if Premchand would have written in the final line of the story this reality of Dalit life that Budhiya [Madhav's wife] was pregnant with the zamindar's [landowner] child. That he had raped Budhiya in the field. Then, those words

[62] Brahminic writers appreciated "The Shroud" for its realistic depiction of Dalit lives (Mukherjee 1985, 146-47, but Dalit writers condemned the story for its anti-Dalit depiction (Bharati 2000, 87-88; Gajarwala 2011; 579).

> would shed light on the story like a lamp, and we would understand everything. (Dharamveer 2005 quoted in Brueck 2016, 192)

Although sexual violence against Dalit women is rampant, Dharamveer's unorthodox take on the story triggered controversy and attracted criticism. Undeterred by condemnation**,** Dharamveer asks, "What would be better [for Ghisu and Madhav]—allowing Budhiya and her child to die, or raising another's child while calling it your own?" (Dharamveer 2005 quoted in Brueck 2016, 193). Dharamveer's reading of "The Shroud" constitutes a political practice of unreading from a peculiarly Dalit perspective that "challenges the structure of typicality, and the ensuing allusive chain, on which an upper-caste reading is premised" (Gajarawala 2011, 580). Dalit women writers upbraided Dharamveer for arguing that Ghisu and Madhav's callousness toward Bhudiya is a positive choice that restores their agency by restoring their masculinity. Upper-caste writers as well as Dalit women writers have questioned the ethical dimension of Dharamveer's argument, disregarding the fact that violence against women—particularly Dalit women—is an everyday occurrence and that caste purity is maintained via oppressing women. Without refuting Dalit writers' critique of "The Shroud," I suggest that Premchand's story criticizes the whole village by exposing Dalit callousness and the upper-caste villagers' exploitative practices.

However, unlike Premchand, there have been writers known for their anti-brahminic politics. The Maharashtrian playwright Vijay Tendulkar wrote many "controversial plays" about modern India (see Vanita 2001, 332-335). His plays are so dark that they become intolerable to watch. The viewer may feel the "experience of being spat on" (Loomba 2013, 106). His work ruptures familiar frames of reference, assaults both intellectually and viscerally, and goes beyond, what Foucault terms, "the limit of experience" where the standard consolations of everyday life are ripped by "violence and vituperation, derangement and destruction, an all-out, uncompromising attack on the foundations of culture" (Trilling 1965 quoted in Felski 2008, 107). In *Uses of Literature,* Rita Felski talks about the role of recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock in a work of art. The shock component supersedes the other three in Tendulkar work. In fact, Felski's theorization of shock illuminates societal response to Tendulkar's work:

> [I]f shock-effects are ratcheted up too high, they are likely to trigger intense waves of revulsion or indignation that drive audiences out of theaters or cause them to slam shut their books, cutting off all further engagement with the work of art […]. Shock thus teeters precariously between the threat of two forms of failure, caught between the potential

> humiliation of audience indifference and the permanent risk of outright and outraged refusal. (Felski 2008, 130-131)

The two forms of failure that Felski suggests toward the end of the passage—humiliation of and rejection by the audience because of the work's shock effects—underscore Tendulkar's work, which aims to force ordinary people to confront what they overlook in everyday life. The very act of confronting the issues reveals one's own complicity in a way that cannot be deflected. Tendulkar goes on to expose caste inequalities and corruption with an angry, childlike irreverence and abandon as "hostile to individual aspirations" (Kanwar 1993, 1). However, his work, despite its unsettling and provocative edges, is ultimately ineffective in undermining core brahminic ideas since it appears exaggerated to the extent that it seems staged, excessive, and therefore, unrelated to life. Tendulkar aims to jolt the audience, but the sheer rage of his work is such that his viewers either look away or remind themselves that they are in the domain of theater to preserve their sanity**.**

5. Inscrutable Voices

Unlike clearly distinguishable brahminic and anti-brahminic writers, abrahminic writers resist taking pro- or anti-caste stances. Although these writers claim to be apolitical, their works seem to remain within the brahminic domain. Saddat Hassan Manto and Ismat Chugtai fit well into this abrahminic category. By examining Manto's "Boo" and Chugtai's "Lihaaf," I seek to show that, even though their work is neither like Gandhi, Narayan, or Naipaul nor like Roy, it remains within the confines of caste.

Manto's "Smell" ("Boo")[63] is a story that revolves around a young, upper-caste man, Randheer. Nowhere in the story does the narrative mention Randheer's background, but his caste and class become apparent as the story unfolds. One afternoon when he sees a young woman from his balcony, drenched in rainwater, standing under a tree, he invites her to his flat with a gesture, and soon has sex with her. He feels intoxicated by her smell, which simultaneously repels and attracts him. Afterward when he marries a woman of his own caste and class, the gypsy woman's smell continues to haunt him, and he feels incapable of having sex with his wife who has a clean, light-skinned body.

Manto's story probes the nature of sexuality or sexual desire, illustrating that societal rules cannot suppress or regulate it. But if one reads the story from a caste perspective, the story reveals Randheer's and Manto's brahminic hypocrisy. Although Manto casually divulges Randheer's

[63] Manto published "Boo" in 1941 in a collection of short stories titled Dhuan (Smoke). I refer to Muhammad Umar Memon 2012 English translation titled "Smell."

promiscuous nature at the outset, he defends Randheer's actions: "[Randheer] had no thought whatsoever of getting her into bed with him. Noticing how thoroughly soaked she was, he feared the poor thing might catch pneumonia so he said, 'Take off those wet clothes! You'll catch cold' " (Manto [1941] 2012, 69). Randhir visits brothels and hunts women for sex, but now with the war going on, women are not easily available, which makes him feel "despondent" (68). In light of Randheer's predatory nature, the narrative's defense of Randhir's motives and character seems questionable. Urban Indian streets are full of homeless people of all kinds, and yet Randheer seeks to help a young woman. In addition, Manto hardly tells the reader anything about the gypsy woman. He describes her body in great detail but withholds her name, caste, and religion. And yet the reader (though only if they want to) can see that she is a non-brahminic Other. Manto assigns her metaphoric untouchability. By referring to her dark body, her strange smell, her easy availability, and her frustrating opacity, Manto displays a familiar brahminic way of Othering the Dalit body so that it can be exploited and, in this case, consumed. Although the clean brahminic Randheer detests "the odor of perspiration and routinely dusted his body with talcum powder and daubed his underarms with deodorant after every bath, he found himself madly kissing the *ghatan'*s hairy armpits over and over […] and felt no revulsion" (71). Randheer's obsessive cleanliness and the gypsy woman's overwhelming smell evoke the Dalit-Brahmin dichotomy. He reflects on the impact of the gypsy woman's repulsive and yet pleasant body smell on him: "He felt that he knew it, was familiar with it, and even understood what it signified, but couldn't explain it to anyone" (71). Manto's nuanced study of sexuality manifests unintended meanings and associations when it is examined from a Dalit perspective.

Furthermore, it is not only the gypsy woman who is presented as an object for consumption, but also Randheer's upper-caste wife whom he marries after his sexual venture with the gypsy woman. Although his wife is described as "clean," "milky-white," "bejeweled," "educated," the heartthrob of countless boys at her college, and the daughter of a distinguished magistrate, she is merely an object for Randheer (72-73). Each time he looked at her,

> he would find himself thinking that he'd just pried open some crate and taken her out—as if she was a consignment of books or china. Her body had marks in several spots just like the marks and scratches left on books and china from packing and shipping. (71-72)

Just as with the gypsy woman, the reader hardly gets to know Randheer's wife. Both women are shown from Randheer's point of view. They exist only for him. He desires the gypsy woman's body, but not her. He likes his wife's class and caste, but not her body. Thus the story's subtext

accentuates the subordinated position of women and the dominant position of men. The upper-caste male renders an 'Untouchable' woman touchable and a touchable wife 'Untouchable'—an aspect that governs men and women relationships in the upper-caste domain.

Whereas both Manto and Chugtai have similar socio-cultural concerns, Chugtai, unlike Manto, has addressed homosexuality in her story "The Quilt" ("Lihaaf").[64] Many contemporary queer theorists cite the story as being progressive and ahead of its time which upon its publication caused outrage among the Muslim community in India (Priyadarshini 2014, 67-80; Sengupta 2018). "The Quilt" is told from the perspective of an 11-year-old girl who goes to live with her affluent aunt, Begum Jaan. The reader learns that her aunt is unhappy because her husband spends all his time away from home with young men. However, when Begum Jaan becomes sick, he finds her a female masseur, Rabbo, who becomes Begum Jaan's servant and stays with her mistress all the time. The girl shares the room with her aunt. At night she sees unusual shadows on the wall assuming strange shapes and hears sounds as of someone licking chutney. All these unusual sounds and shadows, emanating from under the quilt, evoke fear in the girl. At night, when she can no longer bear the moving shadows on the wall, the young girl gets up and turns on the light, only to see the indescribable: "Good God! I gasped and plunged into my bed" (Chugtai [1942] 1999, 40)—she witnesses the act of oral sex between Begum Jaan and Rabbo. Ruth Vanita has noted that "the image of chutney, the sounds of eating, and the metaphor used earlier of a cat lapping all strongly suggest that what the narrator witnesses when the quilt is lifted is an act of oral sex" (2014, 7).

Indian queer theorists hail "The Quilt" as a progressive story, ignoring the fact that the story vilifies homosexuality as strange and abnormal. Chugtai mobilizes all the stereotypes one associates with homosexuals as she shows Begum Jaan and Rabbo's relationship as situational and mutually exploitative. In the absence of Rabbo, Begum Jaan is transformed quickly into a pedophile. In addition, the largely absent husband keeps his house open to "students—young, fair and slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him" (Chugtai [1942] 1999, 36). All these strands give the story a homophobic weft, a fact missed by scholars who focus on contemporary queer writings in India. The story ends on an equally homophobic note. The girl, who is Chugtai herself, says that she would never be able to describe what she saw that night when she turned on the light and drew back the quilt. The girl's utter shock embodies societal disgust for non-normative sexualities. The elephant-like moving images she sees every night on the wall which do not let her sleep serve as a metaphor for non-normative sexualities that must not be named. Homophobia is

[64] Ismat Chugtai wrote "Lihaaf" in 1942. I refer to M. Asaduddin's 1999 English translation titled "The Quilt.

implicit in the young girl's reaction. She would not have shown such fear and disgust had she seen any other straight couple in a comparable situation. Also, in keeping with the girl's homophobic response to a homophobic story, Chugtai regretted writing the "ill-fated story" (quoted in Sengupta 2018, para.15). She wrote, "I am still labeled as the writer of *Lihaaf*. The story brought me so much notoriety that I got sick of life. It became the proverbial stick to beat me with and whatever I wrote afterward got crushed under its weight" (para.1). Like Manto, Chugtai was taken to court for writing an obscene story, but she was acquitted (Bhatia 2020; Waheed 2013). One can argue that the British court absolved Chugtai because her story, rather than broadening the conversation about sexuality, affirmed not only the brahminic but also the Victorian homophobia prevalent at that time. In other words, the author, the court, and the protesting orthodox Muslim crowd upheld the pro-normative order, governed by Brahminism.

All these categories of writers under discussion—brahminic, anti-brahminic, and abrahminic—seem to bolster Brahminism. While anti-brahminic writers oppose caste and question caste order, they unintentionally reinforce caste.[65] When anti-brahminic writers expose brahminic writers' pro-caste politics in front of a non-brahminic audience, some scholars argue that this legitimizes Brahminism (Novetzke 2011, 235). By supporting anti-caste politics, Brahmins create a brahminic "double," a discursively constructed "Brahmin," that deflects or diffuses criticism and enables the Brahmin performer or composer to maintain a position of importance as a Brahmin in the public sphere (232-135). Seen in this way, anti-brahminic discourse performance perpetuates brahminic order. Without undermining the impact of anti-caste discourse, in the pages that follow I will turn to three novels—R.K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*—to gain an understanding of the mechanics of the caste engine that runs India.

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[65] For instance, many Dalit scholars argue that, although Arundhati Roy's essay on Gandhi and Ambedkar, "The Doctor and the Saint" (2014), shows Gandhi's anti-Dalit politics, the essay is about Gandhi, not Ambedkar. Dalit writer and lawyer Bojja Tarakam complained, "Most of the preface is about Gandhi, rather than Ambedkar. What is the need to write so much about him?" (quoted in Vij 2014, para. 12). Also, Dalit Camera (2014), a YouTube channel that documents Dalit voices, asked Roy, "Your essay reads more like an essay on re-appraisal of Gandhi. Ambedkar is merely used to introduce Gandhi. What is your response?" See also, Shanmugavelan (2014).

III

The Folding Figure of a Brahmin in R. K. Narayan's The English Teacher

In his introduction to R. K. Narayan's translation of the *Ramavataram,* Kamban's 12th-century version of the *Ramayana,* Pankaj Mishra notes that Narayan's admiration for the epic hero, Rama, "as a cultural and social ideal is clear throughout the book" ([1972] 2006, 15). In Kamban's *Ramayana*, Rama says cruel things to his wife, Sita, which directly challenges Rama's image as an exemplary moral being. Mishra points out that Narayan's translation "drops Kamban's account […] and chooses to bring in Valmiki's [*Ramayana*][66] much more moderate version of Rama's decidedly odd [objectionable] behaviour" (16). Mishra further adds, "It is as though Narayan cannot fully acknowledge Rama's lapse into cruelty" (16). This urge to portray the epic hero who embodies brahminic culture and its value system as the *maryada purushottam* or an ideal man and yet erasing his cruelty amounts to upholding the caste system as a divinely sanctioned system, but ignoring the violence that lies therein. Narayan shows the same pro-brahminic attitude toward his character Krishna in his novel *The English Teacher*, published in 1945. Narayan's novel aligns itself with the grand brahminic narrative that demands self-sacrifice for the higher social good, but which tends to serve only the brahminic status quo and is often directed against people who do not benefit from the status quo (i.e. women, Dalits, homosexuals). It demands that these groups erase themselves so that heterosexual male Brahmins and others who benefit from the status quo continue to do so. The emphatic production of marriage and begetting children as a religious duty leads to the oppression of lower-caste people, homosexuals, and women. Focusing on the notions of dharma and untouchability as expounded in the *Manusmriti* and some key episodes from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, I will examine different aspects of Narayan's brahminic male character Krishna. I argue that his upholding of caste has serious consequences for others and for himself.

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[66] The poet Valmiki is considered to have written the first *Ramayana.* Sen (1976, 122-130) argues that Rama is mentioned in Jataka stories that are even older than Valmiki's *Ramayana.* See also Thapar (2014, 192-204).

In his essay "Phenomenology of Untouchability" (2009), Sundar Sarukkai concludes that Brahmins outsource whatever part of themselves they see as revolting to the body of the Untouchable. The everyday self-purifying rituals of a Brahmin are strategic moves to foist the burden of impurity onto bodies permanently marked as Untouchables. In everyday life, by refusing to touch, Brahmins turn people into Untouchables. However, this brahminic refusal to touch also implies that one is not experiencing life because it is only via touch one feels the other and oneself: "To touch is to touch oneself" (Sarukkai, 2009, 44), which is to say that without tactile experience self-experiencing is impossible. So, when Brahmins practice untouchability, they centrally limit themselves. By practicing untouchability against the defined Other, one "always and necessarily practises untouchability with respect to oneself" (44). Gopal Guru's invocation of " 'the folded body' of the Brahmin" illustrates how to practice untouchability (Guru cited in Sarukkai 2009, 44) Brahmins have to bend, fold, and limit themselves, constantly fearing the touch of Untouchables and thus remaining in a permanent state of nervous agitation. The extent to which Brahmins practice untouchability, that is to say, the degree to which they enclose and fold themselves from the touch of both human and non-human others, determines the extent to which they are alive. Perfecting the practice of untouchability implies death.

This brahminic fixation on notions of ritual purity, pollution, and the practice of untouchability, and thus encompassing distancing, enfoldings, and maintaining boundaries, also seems to mark R. K. Narayan's work which engages almost exclusively with upper-caste people. Yet despite this reductive view, his work is perceived as being authentically Indian. This familiar admiration for Narayan's authenticity suggests a collective brahminic endorsement of caste. The authenticity which readers tend to attribute to Narayan, and which seems natural and apolitical, I argue, is embedded in his caste politics. Narayan's brahminic utopia of Malgudi is so attractive that his upper-caste readers willingly embrace his work as being truly Indian, oblivious to his pro-brahminic ideology and its consequences for non-brahminic people. Amit Chaudhuri has observed that Malgudi, for Narayan, "is not so much the crystallization of a solitary impulse, as it is an occasion for a small-scale but continual transaction, or series of transactions in the currency of his material" (2008, 247-248). He adds that Narayan is less interested in writing an original novel than in recycling used material, which allows him to show "a web of multiple transactions undertaken by its characters" (248). But these "transactions" that make Malgudi come alive take place only among *dvija,* the twice-born,[67] in Narayan's novels. Although Malgudi's Untouchables play a key role in preparing the ground for brahminic transactions to take place, they are erased.

[67] Within the touchable castes, the upper-three varnas or castes are considered as dvijas, or twice-born. These are Brahmins, Kshatriya, and Veshya.

Thus, Narayan's Malgudi mirrors the caste system that keeps Untouchables out of its domain. Narayan's open-ended interest in "transactions" is essentially an unacknowledged but overarching brahminic interest in non-brahminic others who make "a web of multiple transactions" among Narayan's upper-caste characters possible. As a Brahmin writer, Narayan does not want his characters to strike a perfect "transaction." Rather he recycles old material, not guided by "solitary impulse" (247) or by serious contemplation, but by the familiar, communal, and brahminic epistemology that thrives on inequality and the practice of untouchability and thus sustains the brahminic hegemony, in contrast to an imagination that offers "perfection" in a social sense, based on notions of equality. Narayan's resistance to acknowledging non-brahminic people and to engaging with new material or outside "influence" are the dominant features of caste.

Elsewhere, Narayan appeals to his critics to read his stories only for pleasure, not as raw material for hidden meanings and socio-cultural analysis. Thus, he asks them to accept his fictional world as it is without questioning or challenging its status quo. Being positioned at the top of the caste hierarchy, when Narayan says, "I'm not out to enlighten the world or improve it" (2001, 517), or when one of his Brahmin characters says about his servant, "take him as he [is]; to improve or enlighten him would only exhaust the reformer and disrupt nature's design" (1992, 258), he is embracing the imperfections of his world as necessary, namely, the caste system. This protectionist sensibility toward "nature's design" (brahminic-order) that runs throughout his work makes him wary of external influences that may disrupt or expose Malgudi's subterraneous caste moorings. As a supposedly authentic Indian writer, Narayan insists on his indifference to the wider canon of English fiction, and in fact that he does not even read modern fiction in order to "avoid every kind of influence" (quoted in Tharoor 1994, 40). Like caste, Narayan resents being altered.

Many brahminic writers share Narayan's attitude toward caste, and like him, they either erase caste or assign their Dalit characters brahminic qualities, which is to say that Dalit characters do not appear as Dalit, but as proxy Brahmins.[68] In doing so, the upper-caste writers erase the specificity of caste—a common trope readily evident in Indian English fiction. In *Babu Fictions*, Tabish Khair refers to this brahminic tendency of upgrading Dalit characters for easy narration that

> follows the logic of the historical *hiranyagarbha* ceremony by which a thin 'nobility' was recognized, differentiated and absorbed in the Aryan/ized upper castes while allowing the rest of the tribe to be incorporated as cheap labour at the lowest levels of peasantry. A tribal individual is set apart, promoted into an accessible, upper category and, hence, made

[68] Baka in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *The Untouchable* (1935) and Velutha in Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) are two well-known examples.

> 'narratable' while the tribal masses sink into the lowest economic levels and remain unnarrated. (2001, 138)

Khair presents the concept of the *hiranyagarbha* ceremony in a way that deemphasizes its rootedness in Vedic religion. By using words such as "tribals," "cheap labour," and "peasantry," Khair frames the hiranyagarbha ceremony in non-religious and class terms, blunting its connection with Hinduism and thus with caste. The Sanskrit word *hiranyagarbha* immediately connects itself to ancient Indian epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. While these epics sanction caste, they also postulate that, when necessary, people and ideas that criticize caste could be traded and thus incorporated into the brahminic fold (see Vanita and Kidwai 2001, xvi). So what Khair sees in contemporary Indian English fiction—that is, the brahminic politics of Dalit erasure or of their coercive assimilation— has long been present in Indian religious and literary traditions with their kinship to caste epistemology.

However, what sets Narayan apart from other brahminic writers writing in English is that Narayan**,** unlike them, comes very close to endorsing the caste system but, paradoxically, without appearing to do so. When critic Ramesh Srivastava says that "Narayan has a photographic eye for an object […]. In recording his objects, he is like the oscillating movie camera, which catches and videotapes all that goes through its eye" (1981, 204), or when Britta Olinder admiringly notes that "Narayan's realism is above all seen in his drawing of the background, the day-to-day life" (1985, 8), Narayan succeeds as a brahminic writer because both critics seem oblivious to the fact that Narayan's evolved "photographic eye" and his "everyday realism" bar the Dalits.

In *One Way Street*, Walter Benjamin (1979, 9) writes, "One cannot use the life to interpret the work. But one can use the work to interpret the life." While I have made some remarks on Narayan and the brahminic nature of his work, my concern in this chapter, keeping Benjamin's injunction in mind, is not the author Narayan. Rather, I am interested in how caste harms Dalits and deforms Brahmins in Narayan's novel *The English Teacher.* I seek to investigate the impact of caste and its social and psychical repercussions on Narayan's upper-caste male characters. The first four sections of this chapter discuss Narayan's Brahmin character, Krishna. I focus on who Krishna is when he is at home and when he is outside the home, his relationship with his wife and others. Thus, I seek to examine how caste operates in a brahminic home. I argue that Narayan's Krishna is a prototype of a Rama-like figure. I read this prototypical brahminic figure as what I call a 'suitable boy' in order to demonstrate that, although his caste protects him in obvious ways, it also limits him. In his aspiration to remain a Brahmin, Krishna (and Narayan) erases not only non-brahminic others but also himself. In addition to Narayan's work and queer theory that focuses on India, I refer

briefly to Sandip Roy's *Don't Let Him Know* (2016) to illustrate the "unseeable" violence that goes into the construction of the brahminic home and the queer reality of the suitable boy, thus subverting the novel's surface text that frames Malgudi as brahminic and hetero-normative. In the concluding section of this chapter, I re-examine Krishna's male friendships in light of the phenomenology of 'touch' in the brahminic tradition that constitutes the practice of untouchability, arguing that his male friendships which seem real but also imagined indicate his alienation and delusion, both surfacing as the effect of untouchability on him.

1. The Brahmin Krishna and Non-Brahminic Others

When the novel opens, Krishna, a Brahmin English teacher, is seen living as if he were a bachelor with other male students and teachers on campus, whereas his wife, Susila, and their toddler daughter, Leela, are staying with her parents. Soon afterward, when Susila comes to live with Krishna, he rents an independent house and starts a seemingly proper family life with Susila and their daughter. Within a few months of their living together, Susila suddenly becomes ill and dies of typhoid. The rest of the novel concerns Krishna's quest for inner peace following the loss of his wife. Whereas the narrative seemingly presents Krishna to be an ideal husband rewarded for his good karma (Atkinson 1987, 16), it also allows other interpretations. In this section, I will show that the way Krishna engages with non-brahminic others reveals his brahminic biases.

At Krishna's college, all his colleagues and students appear to be upper-caste except for Singaram, an eighty-year-old servant who is a lower-caste Shudra (servant), but not a Dalit. In the novel, servants like Singaram appear, but not Dalits, nor is their presence acknowledged. The brahminic purity is so inextricably tied to Dalit impurity that Dalits are not allowed to come in direct contact with the upper castes.[69] Servants and daily wage earners collude with upper castes in ways that exclude Untouchables, revealing a complex functioning of caste and class dynamics that works against Dalits. Whereas the novel emphasizes Krishna's kindness, his prejudice against Dalits keeps surfacing even though Dalits never appear directly in the novel. As for Singaram, although he has served Krishna for a long time, Krishna despises him. Another significant recurring trope in Narayan's work is that the lower-caste workers appear on the doorsteps of the upper castes, begging for work. Even though the upper-caste families claim they do not have jobs to offer, they will hire but only after some clever negotiation, and pretend that this is done out of kindness. Only when these workers show themselves as worthy servants are they kept. The power to set the terms and conditions of their employment which borders on slavery resides solely with the employer, a

[69] Aakar Patel (2009) focuses on the abject treatment of servants in Indian middle-class homes. Sara Dickey (2000) notes that employers speak of their servants "as dirty, disease carrying, and polluted" (481)

pattern that recurs in Narayan's fiction (Hai 2018, 335-353), but not limited to it. Rather, it is endemic to the lives of domestic servants across India (see Lahiri 2017), which seems connected to the anti-Shudra caste laws enshrined in the *Manusmriti*.[70]

Krishna and Susila employ one such woman-servant after careful deliberation. Susila initially resents the idea of employing her, but soon she finds the servant's help indispensable: "She cooked the food for us, tended the child, gave us the necessary courage when the child had fever or stomachache […]. She established herself as a benign elder at home, and for us it meant a great deal" (Narayan [1945]1993, 44). She is an excellent worker who is also inexpensive to maintain. She lives "on one meal a day, just a handful of rice and buttermilk" (45). Whatever the dynamic of Susila and her husband's relationship, they both effectively exercise their caste privilege toward servants and lower-caste workers. At one point, Susila shouts at the man who brings her the groceries: "Don't stand there and argue. Be off. Your master has offered you an anna more than you deserve. After all the market is only half a mile away!" (41). Here, by remaining mute, Krishna shows that he shares Susila's view**.** Although upper-caste women like Susila are policed and assigned secondary status to men, this does not stop them from exploiting the lower castes.

The old maid who runs the house hardly speaks in the novel, nor does the reader learn her name. Whenever she appears, she is referred to as "the cook" (68, 71) or "the old lady" (44, 140). This seems odd because she used to work for Krishna's family when Krishna was a child, and now it is on his mother's recommendation that she has turned to Krishna for work because her son has died and she has no means to support herself. She tells Krishna about her role in his past, but she continues to be the nameless cook to him. Krishna describes his first meeting with her thus:

> She looked at me, wrinkling her eyes and said, "Kittu … I have seen you as a baby and a boy. How big have you grown!" She came up to the veranda, peered closely into my wife's face and said: "You are our daughter-in-law. I am an old friend of Kamu," she said, referring to my mother by her maiden name. (41)

All this background information does not change anything. The housemaid remains an anonymous but useful help to Krishna and Susila. Only when she turns up at their door does Krishna think of

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[70] The *Manusmriti* says that the most sacred duty of a Shudra is to serve the Brahmins without grumbling, always reciting the word "Brahman" with utmost devotion. Shudras should not own anything, and Brahmins should give them food leftovers, old torn clothes, spoiled grain and old utensils. Only when a Shudra accepts these conditions will he get salvation. Otherwise he will die the worst death and will go to the worst hell (Manu [n.d.]1991, 10: 121-125). Shudras should have no property of their own (8: 417).

Susila and say: "You must spend some more time reading or stitching or singing. Man or woman is not born merely to cook and eat" (42). Narayan, thus, portrays Krishna as a caring husband here, but this caring attitude is triggered when cheap labor presents itself. As the story unfolds, we see how a brahminic household creates layered inequalities. In Krishna's family, everyone else's position is subservient to him. Everyone has their place on a sliding scale of oppression: his mother, Susila, Susila's parents, and finally the maid. Dalits do not appear at all in this social system—not even as victims in this hierarchy of oppression.

However, Krishna's brahminic leanings that remain subtle in an intimate space like the home emerge with full force outside it. Following a small argument with the landlord, Krishna shouts his caste status to intimidate him: "Everybody knows how good we are, and how cultured our family is! […]. Don't mistake me for an ordinary person!" (26-27). The text does not spell out the caste dimension of Krishna's outburst, but it is implied. On hearing that Krishna is a college teacher, the landlord is positively stunned: " 'College teacher!' He gave a salute with both hands and said, 'I revere college teachers, our *Gurus*. Meritorious deeds in previous births make the guru in this life. I'm so happy. I only wanted a good, cultured family' " (26). Phrases such as "our gurus," "previous births," and "a salute with both hands" (*pranam)* show how Brahmins are received and also how everyday practices are shaped by Vedic concepts that are expounded in the *Manusmriti* (Manu [n.d.] 1991, 2: 107-127; 7: 133-143) and the *Natayashastra* (Muni [n.d.] 1951**,** 335-354). Incidents showing Krishna's brahminic privilege keep surfacing, revealing his attitude toward servants and Dalits. At the railway station, he seeks the help of a coolie whom he calls "Number-Five" (Narayan [1945]1993, 31),[71] and despite having known him for "several years" (31), Krishna does not know his name. On another occasion, when he goes to the bus station to pick up his mother, he mentions the "unbearable dust" (171) and notices the plight of animals (and even the "miserable" tamarind tree) that suffer the blinding "heat of the sun" (171). However, he remains oblivious to emaciated men working in that heat for bare survival. Before leaving the bus station, he quips**,** "we enjoyed the whole show, although the sun baked us" (172). These perceptions indicate that brahminic aesthetics has a place for animals, but not for non-brahminic Others.

Everywhere in the narrative, non-brahminic people are presented in a negative light. The everyday Untouchables, who never appear, are held responsible for Susila's sickness and

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[71] While Shudras are expected to serve the upper castes faithfully, the *Manusmriti* or Manu is not satisfied with this. He wants this servile status of the Shudras to be expressed in their names and surnames. He says that a Brahman's name should denote something auspicious, a Kshatriya's name should express strength, and a Vaishya's name should convey wealth, but a Shudra's name must express something contemptible and breed disgust (see Manu [n.d.] 1991, 2: 31-32). The *Natyashastra*, a Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts, offers a theory of naming in chapter nineteen "Modes of Address and Intonation" that reinforces Brahmin-Dalit differences **(**Muni [n.d.] 1951, 335-354). See also footnotes 69, 70.

subsequent death, a brahminic narrative trait that resonates with the *Ramayana* in which non-brahminic people are represented in similar ways.[72] When Susila goes out with Krishna to view a property and uses a dirty lavatory, the owner claims that his unguarded property is made dirty by encroachers: "This is one of the curses of the place. It is so far out and so near the field and village that all kinds of people passing this way stop here for shelter, and they foul a lavatory beyond description ..." (63). It is strongly implied that these anonymous people, who are not identified but only defined through their spatial demography, are Untouchables. The very people who keep public places clean are criticized for their uncleanliness and implicitly deemed responsible for causing Susila's death. In addition, they are often shown as idle and beastly. When Krishna visits a neighborhood where non-Brahmins such as carpenters, egg-sellers, and a miscellaneous lot of artisans and traders live, he observes that

> [t]he street was littered with all kinds of things—wood shavings, egg shells, tin pieces and drying leaves. Dust was ankle deep. I wondered why my friend had selected this of all places. I was afraid to allow my daughter to walk here. I felt she would catch all kinds of dreadful diseases. Unkempt and wild-looking children rolled about in the dust, mangy dogs growled at us, donkeys stood at attention here and there. (142)

This neighborhood is within walking distance of Krishna's house, yet he is not familiar with it. The narrative voice echoes Krishna's brahminic sensibility:

> There was every sign that the municipality had forgotten the existence of this part of the town. Yet it seemed to maintain a certain degree of sanitation, mainly with the help of the sun, wind, and rain. The sun burned so severely most months that bacteria and infection turned to ashes. The place had a general clean up when the high winds rose before the monsoon set in, and whirled into a column the paper scraps, garbage, egg-shells, and leaves; the column precipitated itself into the adjoining street, and thence to the next and so on, till, perhaps, it reached a main thoroughfare where the municipal sanitary staff worked, if they worked anywhere at all. (142)

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[72] In the *Ramayana*, at two critical moments when its upper-caste characters Rama and Rama's stepmother Kaikayee act in wicked ways, the narrative holds two lower-caste characters responsible: a washerman Sridharudu, and a hunchbacked servant Manthara. The washerman and the servant appear at specific points in the *Ramayana* as if to take on the burden of Kaikeyi and Rama's highly problematic acts.

By making seemingly mundane observations and using an expression like "municipality sanitary staff," the narrative erases caste, concealing the fact that it is only Dalits who carry out all sanitation-related work in Narayan's Malgudi—a microcosm of democratic India. Also, in the guise of humor, the narrative voice implicitly portrays Dalits as lazy savages (142), but without mentioning a word about the link between clean brahminic neighborhoods and Dalit labor. Here, Krishna is visiting a lower-caste neighborhood, not one inhabited by Dalits. Narayan's narrative does not let his brahminic character enter a Dalit neighborhood.

Although Krishna criticizes laziness in lower castes, he avoids doing any form of manual work himself. The narrative voice devotes one page to portraying Krishna as an ideal (Brahmin) husband eagerly awaiting his wife and daughter's arrival at the railway platform, but he seems averse to dealing with his wife's luggage. The train has not arrived yet, and the nameless coolie "Number Five who work[s] wonders within a split second" (33) is ready to help him. Krishna frets that he may have to carry Susila's trunks. Even moving a sack of rice from the front door of his house to the kitchen once a month seems a burden to him (41). Not only does he avoid physical work, he hides his laziness by giving it some positive virtue. In his hostel days, he plants jasmine, but soon afterward abandons the project and gives it to Singaram, as it involves work. Krishna suddenly thinks of the women in Singaram's house, but this gallantry is absent when Singaram, on the verge of retirement, asks Krishna for a few extra pennies and is refused. However, Krishna continues to get jasmine flowers placed on his window sill. In another instance, just before Krishna's wife and daughter come to live with him, he says: "The next three days I was very busy. My table was placed in the front room of the new house. All my papers and books were arranged neatly. My clothes hung on a peg. The rest of the house was swept and cleaned" (28). More than his patent passivity, these passive sentence constructions indicate his unreliability as a narrator. He claims to be busy, but it is his mother who has done all the work. Such small omissions keep erupting in different contexts, revealing the complex dimensions of his personality.

Throughout the novel, brahminic rituals are observed in Krishna's household, but they are not emphasized. The glimpses of these rituals are seen in the way Krishna and Susila live, how Krishna deals with Susila's illness and her death, and how he interacts with his extended family and colleagues at work. I will elaborate on these aspects in later sections of this chapter. The practice of untouchability is one such ritual, and since it is sanctioned by religion, upper-caste characters like Krishna perform it without a trace of guilt. Whereas upper castes observe different kinds of rituals because it is their dharma, they forbid Dalits from performing similar rituals.[73] Brahmins vigorously

[73] In brahminic discourse, while scholars talk about Shudras or servants, they rarely include Untouchables. Servants, unlike Untouchables, fall in the domain of caste. Therefore, caste Hindus, not Untouchables,

engage with cleansing rituals on a daily basis to remove their impurity, but this must not be confused with a Dalit's impurity because unlike a Dalit's, a Brahmin's impurity is self-imposed and temporal and can be expunged by performing rituals (see Sarukkai 2009, 39-48). At the time of Susila's sickness, these rituals are observed tangentially. Also, although Krishna is portrayed as contemplative, at no point does he reflect on the caste that is so prevalent in Malgudi. After Susila's death, when he resigns from his teaching job and informs his college principal, Mr. Brown, that he wants to work with primary school children and the principal asks him if he has the required training, Krishna feels contempt for what he takes to be the principal's European mind: "I looked at him in despair; his western mind, classifying, labeling, departmentalizing …." (Narayan [1945]1993, 179). Ironically, it never occurs to him that his own society not only categorizes but worships the categorization of people through caste.

2. Krishna: A Suitable Boy

In both textual and visual forms,[74] young men are shown to relinquish their personal happiness for the sake of their families. Such men are celebrated and valued particularly in brahminic communities. Rama, the ideal hero of the epic poem the Ramayana, holds a firm grip on the Indian mind because Rama, at every stage in his life, gave up pursuits of personal ambition and desire for the collective good of his family and community. For this reason, Indian families raise their boys to be like Rama, ignoring the playful and erotic Lord Krishna even though, unlike Rama, Krishna is viewed as *solah kala sampoorna,* a complete god, in Hinduism. But still the whole Indian pedagogical thrust is to transform boys into Rama-like figures (Sengupta 2005, 149-151). This is because Rama is *maryada purushotam* (a perfect and supreme being) who lives for his family and community, whereas Lord Krishna is a complex and thus 'queer' god. In a brahminic household, when a boy grows up he is expected to fulfill the wishes of his parents and thus of his caste. He

appear as servants in Narayan's work so that his upper-caste characters go about their everyday life and perform religious rituals without fearing pollution. Radhakrishnan (1922, 13) writes about Shudras in such an elevated way that he seems to endorse the caste system: "By a slow conquest of the passions, by a rising knowledge of the spiritual basis of the world, all men who are born *sudras* gradually rise in the scale till they become Brahmans." More recent scholarship on servants in India tends to erase the modalities of caste such as the distinction between Shudras/servants and Untouchables. Terms such as "domestic help," "maidservant," and "domestic service" sanitize the language but without changing the service conditions (Sinha 2019, 45). These new terms emerge as brahminic tools that "create new layers of hidden scripts" (45) which sustain the caste order by keeping Untouchables out of the caste fold.

[74] Various figures and events from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* shape contemporary literature both in vernacular and in English language fiction. They are extensively used in the Hindu iconography such as in calendar-art images and gemstone-set portraits and sculptures and temple architecture and temple engravings. See also Mangharam (2009, 75).

remains duty-bound and fulfills his role, both consciously and unconsciously acting like a self-sacrificial Rama and thus becoming, what I call, a 'suitable boy.' He learns to shape himself after Rama even when he knows he cannot or does not want to be Him. But since he is a suitable boy, he acquiesces to play that role, giving in to his family's demands by suppressing his individual self and desire, which has a range of consequences for him and those around him

In a non-Indian context, this figure of a 'suitable boy' may seem idiosyncratic, but in a brahminic, or Indian, context it plays a crucial role in keeping caste and heterosexuality pro-brahminic. The metaphysical concept of Brahman that is central to Hinduism, and that explains, or rather governs, many aspects of everyday life in explicit and implicit ways, takes embodied form in the figure of the maryada purushottam Rama. For more than 2,000 years, Rama has been hailed as someone everyone should emulate. In the opening lines of the epic poem Ramayana, poet Valmiki questions sage Narada:

> Is there a man in the world today who is truly virtuous? Who is there who is mighty and yet knows both what is right and how to act upon it? Who always speaks the truth and holds firmly to his vows? Who exemplifies proper conduct and is benevolent to all creatures? Who is learned, capable, and a pleasure to behold? Who is self-controlled, having subdued his anger? Who is both judicious and free from envy? Who, when his fury is aroused in battle, is feared even by the gods? (Valmiki [n.d.] 2022, 1: 2-4)

Narada replies: "The many virtues you have named are hard to find. Let me think for a moment, sage, before I speak. Hear now of a man who has them all. His name is Rama […]." Narada goes on to catalog Rama's chief virtues for the next 12 verses. Since then, composers and commentators, poets and writers, musicians and teachers have not stopped thinking about this figure for a single moment, which in its effect goes far beyond the realm of religion, where it is rooted. Even a cursory glance at everyday life in India reveals the centrality of this figure and the values it embodies. Whereas one can cite any number of similar examples, I quote Supreme Court Justice Hidayatullah who said:

> The Ramayana is a mirror of the highest ideals of Hindu culture and civilization. Herein is described the ideal hero Sri Ramachandra who is not only the exemplar for all living and dutiful sons, but who is the ideal husband and king [...]. There can be no better text-book of

> morals which can be safely placed in the hands of youths to inspire them to higher and nobler ideals of conduct and character. (1983, 27)

R. K. Narayan shares this adulation of the story of Lord Rama. In his introduction to his 1972 English translation of Kamban's Tamil version of the *Ramayana,* Narayan wrote:

> It may sound hyperbolic, but I am prepared to state that almost every individual among the five hundred millions living in India is aware of the story of the Ramayana in some measure or other. Everyone of whatever age, outlook, education, or station in life knows the essential part of the epic and adores the main figures in it—Rama and Sita. Every child is told the story at bedtime. Some study it as a part of religious experience, going over a certain number of stanzas each day, reading and rereading the book several times in a lifetime. The Ramayana pervades our cultural life […]. Whatever the medium, the audience is always an eager one. Everyone knows the story but loves to listen to it again. One accepts this work at different levels […]. As one's understanding develops, one discerns subtler meanings; the symbolism becomes more defined and relevant to the day-to-day life. The Ramayana in the fullest sense of the term could be called a book of "perennial philosophy" [which, along with, Vedic texts, appear as the fountainhead of Brahminism in everyday life to Dalits]. ([1972] 2006, 32-33)

The impact of the *Ramayana* on Narayan's work is undeniable. His novels frequently tell some version of the story of Rama. In *The English Teacher,* Narayan calls his protagonist Krishna, but there is nothing Krishna-like about him; he acts like the marayada purushtom Rama, or what I call a 'suitable boy.' The figure of Rama and the "perennial [brahminic] philosophy" it embodies play a crucial role in Narayan's novel (as it does in the *Ramayana*), making its "symbolism more defined and relevant to the day-to-day life." While such a pro-brahminic formulation works for Narayan's upper-caste characters in Malgudi, it unravels as a curse for non-brahminic people. Therefore, the same *Ramayana* that makes such a powerful appeal to brahminic people appears to be a "chamber of horrors" to Dalits like Ambedkar (1979-2003, vol. 9: 296) because such key texts sanction caste.

Focusing on the figure of Rama or suitable boy, I seek to highlight how its cultural centrality reinforces pro-brahminic ideals while it stigmatizes sexual and caste minorities. If the story of Rama and the powerful tropes it generates are effective in shaping India's modern history, literature and culture, and influencing men of diverse political persuasions such as Mahatma Gandhi, Bhimrao Ambedkar, and E. V. Ramaswami as well as painters, artists, and novelists,

Rama's figure also can be examined to study the intersections of caste and (homo)sexuality in Narayan's work.

Sandip Roy's *Don't Let Him Know* (2016) introduces one such Rama-like figure or suitable boy. The novel tells the story of a middle-class Indian family comprising Amit, his father Avinash, and his mother Ramola**.** It is Avinash who emerges as a suitable boy in the novel. One day, when Amit accidentally reads an old letter written by someone named Sumit (a male name), he automatically assumes that the letter is meant for his mother and is surprised that she had taken a lover in the past. As a young bride, Ramola also knew about this letter and thus Avinash's closeted homosexuality, but she kept it a secret from her son. Like Amit, thirty years earlier when Ramola first read the letter, she thought it was written by someone named Sumita, a female name, and not Sumit. Both son and mother read the same-sex love letter in a hetero-normative frame, indicating the hold of caste norms on their thinking.

Sumit's letter reveals his relationship with Avinash: "I was hoping that once we were there [United States] away from the prying eyes of families we'd be able to live the life we dreamed about during those evenings in Calcutta. Now it tastes like dust in my mouth. […] Couldn't you have waited longer? Or did you feel […] we could just carry on as before?" (Roy 2016, 38-39). Sumit's letter betrays that they are both actively involved in a homosexual relationship and have long-term plans, but Avinash, being a suitable boy, caves in to the demands of his family and marries Ramola. Although this letter suggests that Sumit and Avinash are upwardly mobile and educated Indians, Sumit writes to Avinash in a self-censoring manner, not expressing his love, sense of betrayal, and crushed dreams in the idiom one associates with lovers. Although they have been lovers, Sumit feels compelled to write in a normative fashion. Anyone unfamiliar with the queer subculture might misread such a letter even in present-day India, which can also be seen in both Ramola and Amit's first responses to Sumit's letter. Both find it easier to accept the idea of Avinash's non-existing adulterous heterosexual relationship than his real homosexuality. Ramola thinks it would have been much easier for her to talk about the letter had it been addressed to her, which means that she would find it easier to talk to her son about her husband's cross-sex extramarital affair or her own rather than about his homosexuality. Part of her and her son's inability to speak about Avinash's sexuality suggests their deep-seated homophobia, and part of their inability can be seen in caste terms that frame heterosexuality as 'touchable' and homosexuality as 'untouchable.' Therefore, even when gay men embrace their homosexuality, which is perceived as abject, their families still expect them to marry women.[75] This insistence on heterosexual marriage is

[75] Gay men and women who come out to their families frequently encounter a range of responses: from acceptance to honor killing, from emotional torture and financial loss to violent corrective therapies (see

intimately linked with caste norms. Early on in her marriage, Ramola gets to know about Avinash's homosexuality, but, like Avinash, who plays the role of a suitable boy, she plays the 'suitable girl,' and thus their story continues. Sara Ahmed's notions of "self-boying" (2017, 51) and "self-girling" (51) take powerful aspects in a brahminic context because these notions do not remain merely abstractions but emerge as concrete, culturally legible figures of Rama and his wife Sita for all men and women to emulate.

Keeping in mind such complex workings of caste that go into the making of a suitable boy, I want to examine Narayan's Krishna because he shares some distinct features of a suitable boy. In the opening paragraph of the novel, we learn about Krishna's inner life, including hints at his queerness. He tries to be a suitable boy in the tradition of Rama, but he fails, and this failure arguably leads to Susila's death and his own suffering. Whereas Narayan constructs an ideal family man, the text points out Krishna's darker traits and the unethical choices he makes. His choices are thrust upon him, but he pretends to live by them voluntarily. His father tells Krishna—a full-time professor—to live together with Susila and their child, an instruction that is more of an explicit order than a suggestion.

> "Your father-in-law has written a letter to-day. I hear that by God's grace, your wife Susila, and the baby, are keeping well. He suggests that you should take her and the baby and set up the family and not live in a hostel any longer. He has my entire concurrence in this matter, as I think in the best interests of yourself you should set up a family. You have been in the hostel too long and I don't feel you ought to be wasting the best of your life in the hostel as it will affect your health and outlook. […] If you have no serious objection to this, your father-in-law suggests the 10th of next month as the most suitable and auspicious day ... ." (Narayan [1945] 1993, 19)

Although Krishna has been living the life of a single male, now his father, mother, and parents-in-law want him to "set up a family" as if they are suddenly feeling alarmed about something. Krishna says about his father's letter that "there is so much food for thought in it" (20). His father's concern about his professor son's "health and outlook" hides a concern that he does not name. Not only does Krishna accept his father's suggestion, he begins to savor the idea of living with his wife and child: "I felt I was someone whose plans and determinations were of the utmost importance to others" (20). More than desire, it is his family's pressure and their concern for his "health and outlook" that make him suddenly relish an idea that is not his. Here, I also want to point

Patel 2016, paras. 3-4, 12).

out that while Krishna accepts his father's authority and agrees to set up a family, he rejects Mr. Brown's suggestion to not resign. The acceptance of the first and the rejection of the latter suggest Krishna's belief in the caste system that he seems to protect by rejecting a modern institution like college. His privilege is tied to the caste system, not to institutions that may disrupt or put its existence in question. We see how the material component of caste influences his decision making. When Krishna reads his father's letter, he talks about his father's handwriting and writing pads and self-made "bottles of ink" (17), which trigger memories of home: "My father's letter brought back to me not only the air of the village and all my childhood, but along with it all the facts—home, coconut-garden, harvest, revenue demand" (19). Krishna is connected to his family, but his nostalgia also has a strong material component. His notion of "the air of the village and all my childhood" very soon lands on "harvest and revenue." The materiality of "home, coconut-garden, harvest, revenue demands" lends his father's letter a certain authority to which Krishna submits.

Conversely, when considering a letter from his wife, Krishna "hurriedly glance[s] through her letter" (20). He smells his wife's letter before opening it, for it carries the fragrance of jasmine, but he also hastens to add that this fragrance emanates from her trunk "in which she always kept her stationery" (20). The use of flowers serves as a false romance trope because the fragrance of jasmine is associated with Susila's things, not with Susila. Also, Krishna shares with the reader only that part of Susila's letter that focuses on him and the child: "She crawled on her belly all over the place. […] She was learning to say 'Appa,' (father); and with every look was asking her mother when father proposed to take them home" (20). The emotional connection he displays while reading his father's letter is absent when he reads his wife's letter. In this whole brahminic business of "setting up a family," everyone concurs except for Krishna. Later, Narayan depicts Krishna's conjugal life as one long, pleasing Hindu ritual, but underneath this seemingly harmonious marriage, pernicious forces are present. This burden to be like an ideal Rama-like figure eventually makes Krishna retreat from the world and hastens Susila to her untimely death. The novel, by default, hints at Krishna's queerness throughout, including its opening paragraph:

> I was on the whole very pleased with my day—not many conflicts and worries, above all not too much self-criticism. I had done almost all the things I wanted to do, and as a result I felt heroic and satisfied. The urge had been upon me for some days past to take myself in hand. What was wrong with me? I couldn't say, some sort of vague disaffection, a self-rebellion I might call it. The feeling again and again came upon me that I was nearing thirty I should cease to live like a cow (perhaps, a cow, with justice, might feel hurt at the

> comparison), eating, working in a manner of speaking, walking, talking, etc.—all done to perfection, I was sure, but always leaving behind a sense of something missing. (5)

Krishna refers to his sense of "vague disaffection" "self rebellion", and something "missing," but the narrative does not shed even one word about such anxieties later in the novel. At this point, it cannot be his wife. The novel does not give any compelling reason for his bachelor lifestyle except that he prefers to live that way, which he calls a "cow-like"[76] existence. Finally, when he brings his wife and child over to him, he does so at the behest of his family rather than something that he actively initiates. On the contrary, he hesitates to give up his bachelor lifestyle. Could it be that his self-questioning—such as "what was wrong with me? I could not say," and his feeling that he is missing out on something—is a reflection of his suppressed queer desire?

Krishna's self-questioning, his hesitation in bringing his family to him, and his eventual "setting up a family" make one think of other things that emphasize his queerness. He is almost thirty before he starts living with his wife, but the text does not indicate how long he has been married. Since early marriage is the norm rather than an exception, and more so in Krishna's time, the narrative's utter silence about such details regarding Krishna's marriage seems intriguing. He could have been married for any number of years. In addition, although his wife lives only a few miles from his college, he hardly ever visits her. All such trivial details, when taken together, give clues to his struggles with caste norms in the tradition of the brahminic suitable boy.

3. Welcome Home: Susila in a Suitable Boy's Home

The platform scene is crucial in the novel. Although Krishna and Susila already have a child, she comes to live with him for the first time—up to this point he has lived like a bachelor in an all-male hostel, while she has lived with his and her own parents. At the station, we glimpse the negative dynamics of Krishna's relationship with Susila, which remain a permanent fixture of their lives as long as Susila lives. Although the narrative presents Krishna as a caring husband, Krishna is seen agonizing over imagined anxieties, getting edgy at the prospect of doing the unpleasant task of lifting Susila's luggage. The only person he truly waits for is his child, Leela, and, in fact, he remains steadfast in his adoration of her throughout the text. When the train finally arrives, Krishna exhibits a genuine interest in his daughter, but demonstrates rudeness toward his wife: "I saw her sitting serenely in her seat with the baby lying on her lap. 'Only three minutes more', I cried. 'Come

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[76] Krishna's reference to his cow-like existence assumes a queer dimension. The *Kamasutra* compares women to cows, does, swans, and even categorizes women as Padmini (Lotus woman), Chitrini (Art woman), Sankhini (Conch woman), Hastini (Elephant woman), and it categorizes men as Sashaka (Hare man), Vrishabha (Bull man), and Ashva (Horse man). For detail see Vatsyayana ([n.d.] 1925, 31-32)

out.' […] No time to be sitting down; give me the baby' " (32). These are the first words he utters on seeing Susila. Despite his earlier frettings about her heavy luggage, the only thing he actually wants to do is hold his child. Everything physical is done by coolie Number Five and Susila's father. On meeting them, while Krishna talks to Susila, he forgets to greet her father. Susila reminds him to do so, and Krishna makes small talk with him. His father-in-law tells him that Susila and the child had a comfortable journey and that they slept well, to which Krishna says, "Did they, how, how? I thought there was such a crowd" (33). The reader hears Krishna's blunt question, but not his father-in-law's reply. However, Susila defends her father: "What if there are a lot of others in the compartment? Other people must also travel. I didn't mind it" (33). A small conflict ensues between husband and wife. Krishna's earlier negligent manner toward his father-in-law, now, seems calculated. Krishna is upset with him for traveling third class. He also comments negatively on Susila's saree: "Once again in this saree, still so fond of it" (33). After saying this he quickly asks her questions about the child, but the text does not allow her to respond to his remark. One recalls Krishna's earlier talk with the station master where he says**,** "Some people are born niggards … would put up with any trouble rather than [spend money]" (32). Krishna's criticism of Susila's father, in retrospect, seems unwarranted because both of her parents emerge as perfectly polite people in the novel. On their way home in a carriage, Krishna continues to be in the same complaining mode. He says, "She talked incessantly about the habits of the infant, enquired about the plan of our house, and asked the name of the building and streets that we passed" (34). Until this moment, Krishna, not Susila, has been incessantly talking. If one believes Krishna, Susila's excessive talk might be her way to divert Krishna lest he say something offensive about her father.

Krishna's seemingly benign remarks about Susila's third-class train journey and her old saree take a troubling aspect when one sees it in the light of "dowry," [77] a predominantly brahminic practice called *dahej pratha* in which the bride's parents are obliged to give gifts to the bridegroom's family at the time of marriage and on every important occasion thereafter. Also, their small disagreements at the platform recur consistently, taking agonizing proportions, the cause of which seems far deeper than the explanation offered by Narayan's text. Whereas the narrative seeks to constitute a respectable brahminic narrative about Krishna, the text does the opposite when subjected to an anti-brahminic reading.

When Susila is not yet in Krishna's home, Krishna's unpleasant attitude toward Susila in a neutral place like the railway platform is apparent, but once inside his home, she suffers his steady stream of microaggressions. In his quest to be a suitable boy, he wrecks two lives: his own and

[77] To understand the deeper cultural implication of Krishha's complaints in the context of "dowry," which prevails predominantly in brahminic culture, see Oldenburg (2002) and Banerjee (2014).

Susila's. He marries partly because he wishes to belong to his caste community for the safety net it provides and partly because he fears being ostracized for not getting married, which causes him pain, and eventually destroys his family.

As the story unfolds, it seems that what binds Krishna and Susila is the presence of their daughter, Leela, who gives their marriage some semblance of unity. Apart from this redeeming feature, nothing seems solid about their marriage**.** Not even once does Krishna speak with Susila in an intimate way, and once when he compliments her, it turns out to be insincere. He recites a poem he says he has written for her, but he then warns her not to "look at the pages […] between 150 and 200, in the *Golden Treasury.* Because someone called Wordsworth has written similar poems" (Narayan [1945] 1993, 47), inviting her to look at "the forbidden pages" (47), thus making a joke at her expense. Krishna directs her toward the forbidden pages, knowing well that she hardly knows sufficient English to understand poetry written in the English language. Krishna's harmless teasing begins to appear odd. The love and respect that he shows toward his child, he withholds from his wife. Intriguingly, while both come from similar socio-cultural backgrounds, unlike Krishna, Susila does not seek refuge in the English language (see chapter VI, 201). Krishna's harmless teasing begins to appear odd because what he gives to a child, love and respect, he withholds from an adult.

Throughout the novel, Krishna shows almost a visceral obsession with male English poets, and he dreams of spending his time contemplating or writing poetry as if sublimating his desire by attaching himself to books and literature. While he seems to prefer books over his wife, Susila signals her desire by touching him through the hand of her child, even though in brahminic families men are supposed to take the lead in such matters while women are expected to show restraint. Violent complexities lurk underneath their seemingly mundane interactions.

> I left the college usually at 4.30 p.m., the moment the last bell rang, and avoiding all interruptions reached home within about twenty minutes. As soon as I turned the street I caught a glimpse of Silas tinkering at her little garden in our compound or watching our child as she toddled about picking pebbles and mud …. It was not in my wife's nature to be demonstrative, but I knew she waited there for me. So I said: 'I have taken only twenty minutes and already you are out to look for me!' She flushed when I said this, and covered it up with: 'I didn't come out to look for you, but just to play with the child ….' My daughter came up and hugged my knees, and held up my hands with her books. (35)

This scene recalls the ways lovers or husbands and wives are expected to behave according to texts like the *Kamasutra* and the *Natyasastra*. The latter states, "If a woman with a decoration (of her

body) awaits the arrival of her beloved, she should cleverly finish it so that nothing contrary (to propriety) finds expression. Sit down and expect every moment of the coming of the beloved" (Muni [n.d.] 1951, XXIV: 244). Here, Susila fits the role ascribed to the attached wife, waiting for her husband, clean, upright, with jasmine flowers in her hair (Narayan [1945] 1993, 20, 33, 52, 130). But the moment Krishna sees her, he mocks her, which can also be read as a censoring of her standing outside,[78] in the garden next to the street, from where she is visible to passersby, even from the far end of the street. His teasing cannot be read as flirting, because nothing follows Susila's rebuttal. Instead, the narrative breaks into ellipses, and the child appears to save the reluctant husband from showing any physically "demonstrative" gesture toward his wife. Eagerly running away from the college and reaching home within "twenty minutes" shows him to be a loving father, a love he expresses via "hugging" and touching while the wife stands untouched.[79] In other words, he has the agency to decide whom to touch and be touched by. The *Natyasastra* expounds love through different actions such as: "that in relation to duty (dharma), that actuated by material gain (*artha*) and that actuated by passion (*kama*)" (Muni [n.d.] 1951, XX: 72). Being a suitable boy, Krishna performs his marriage as his dharma.[80] And since dharma, and not kama, governs this marriage, it is damaging to the unsuspecting wife. Even though Susila dies of typhoid, she already appears susceptible to disease or dying once she starts living with Krishna. The *Natyasastra* says "being devoid of all pleasures of love and of (any) expectation of (them) one gets Sickness" (XXIV: 186). Since Krishna hardly touches her in the novel, the untouched Susila is destined to invite sickness because there is no way she can escape or annul her marriage. In the brahminic tradition, there is no concept of a *pativrata*, or ideal wife, leaving her husband (Manu [n.d.] 1991, 5: 162). Rather, the *Manusmiriti* emphasizes that *stridharma*, or duties for wives, requires every woman to devote herself completely to her husband, irrespective of whether he is deserving (5:154).[81]

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[78] The *Kamasutra* says a lot about public women or courtesans, but it says almost nothing about wives. The more bold or erotic the figure of the courtesan becomes, she moves further away from the brahminic wife. Unlike the *Manusmriti*, *Kamasutra* does not impose restrictions (Vanita 2001, 47), but it distinguishes between wives and courtesans. Seen in this way, Krishna's first words on seeing Susila can be read as a brahminic man's attempt at censoring her wife's manner which at this point recalls public women. "A courte[s]an, well dressed and wearing her ornaments, should sit or stand at the door of her house, and without exposing herself too much, should look on the public road so as to be seen by passers-by like an object on view for sale. She should form friendships with such persons as would enable her to separate men from other women, and attach them to herself […] or set upon by persons with whom she may have dealings of some kind or another" (Vatsyayana ([n.d.] 1925, 132).

[79] We will see in later sections that what seems benign in these instances appears misogynistic in retrospect. Only after she dies does he begin to grow obsessed with her.

[80] Despite being a text on sexuality and eroticism and the art of living well, the *Kamasutra* states that "*Dharma* is better than *Artha*, and *Artha* is better than *Kama*" (Vatsyayana ([n.d.] 1925, 8).

[81] Extolling stridharma, Abdhyashand Giri writes that "woman as wife has only one goal: serving her

While Krishna does not show any genuinely loving gestures, he does show anger toward Susila. When Susila sells some of his old examination papers and an old dysfunctional clock, not realizing that those items are important to him, Krishna fumes with anger. The narrative does not explain why these things are so important to him. Technically, old examination answer sheets should be the property of the college's Examination Records Office. As for the clock, Krishna does not say it has any special meaning for him when Susila complains about it earlier: "When you are away it starts bleating after I have rocked the cradle for hours and made the child sleep, and I don't know how to stop it. It won't do for our house. It is a bother" (Narayan [1945] 1993, 47). Susila discards the clock for the child's sake and the papers for his sake, but he finds her act intrusive: "She doesn't care. If she cared, would she sell my clock? I must teach her a lesson" (49). She fears his anger to such an extent that she responds to it with silence. Krishna's intense anger seems odd. He fumes, "Her name enraged me" (47). Why does he become so enraged over something so inconsequential? His anger seems excessive in this situation.

Consequently, Susila sobs for a long time, but Krishna continues with his work in the adjoining room until midnight. Krishna claims to feel the pang of her sobs and wants to console her, but this feeling is not strong, so he does not. He only says, "What is the use of crying, after committing a serious blunder?" (50) And now when he seems less threatening, she says, " 'What do you care […]. If I had known you cared more for a dilapidated clock.' She did not finish her sentence, but broke down and wept bitterly" (50). Krishna admonishes her and asks her to behave like a normal human being and to "[s]top crying, otherwise people will think a couple of lunatics are living in this house" (50). The novel does not shed any light on Susila's feelings.[82] It only focuses on those of Krishna. For the next two days, she avoids him. Out of feelings of guilt, he takes her out, and she readily accepts his proposal. At this point, the power equation of their relationship is firmly established. At the railway station when she was still in the company of her father, she voiced her disagreements with Krishna. Inside the home, she submits to him in the tradition of *"pativrata,"* or devoted wife, which the *Manusmiriti* identifies as "*stridhrama*" (Joy 2003, 60), and the brahminic culture commends.

While Krishna's proposal to take her out is shown as his way to heal the relationship, it can also be read in a way that has nothing to do with Susila. Krishna wants to buy a bigger house so that he has enough space where he can spend time alone. Even earlier when he rents their present house,

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husband" (quoted in Banerjee 2005, 133), even if the husband is foolish, cruel, or vile.

[82] Anita Desai has noted that women in Indian English fiction are not expected to argue or complain, no matter how unacceptable things are: "[A]ll they could do was burst into tears and mope. This is surely the reason for so much tearfulness in women's fiction a strain now dominant and now subdued, but ever present" (1983, 56).

he puts considerable emphasis on securing a space where he cannot be disturbed: "[The house] must keep us all together and yet separate us when we would rather not see each other's faces … "(Narayan [1945]1993, 23). In every aspect he is conservative, but his approach to space is quite un-Indian considering the fact that, in India, the approach to space is more communal than individual. People tend to prefer the joint-family system[83] as opposed to the nuclear family. Krishna's wish for his own space recalls his earlier hesitancy to forgo his single lifestyle for "setting up a home." Also, his over-emphasis on not seeing "each other's faces" seems unkind because these "others" are his wife and child, who, at this point, are not living with him. The mere idea of them living together creates disquiet in him. In addition, transactions such as buying property materialize more quickly when the buyer is a family man. The presence of a wife and children increases a man's credibility. So, it can be argued that Krishna takes Susila out with him partly for pragmatic reasons and partly to assuage his guilt, both of which have little to do with her.

When Krishna negotiates financial matters concerning the property and Susila goes away to check the site on her own, he proposes to escort her, but she casually dismisses his proposal: "Oh, won't you let me alone even for a few minutes? [...]. Nobody will carry me off. I can look after myself!" (61). Krishna asks her not to go alone, but she ignores him, which results in her death. Up to this point, she has never gone outside alone. She has always a male figure around, either her father or husband. As the postcolonial gender critic Ketu Katrak (1992, 398) notes, "A woman's interest, let alone active role, in the outside calls into question her virtue" because her sexuality is no longer controlled by the house. Through this symbolic act of exercising her will by disregarding that of her husband, we see two things emerge: Susila accidentally locks herself in a toilet and a fly bites her, which finally leads to her death, and the narrative holds "anonymous" people[84] (Untouchables) responsible for her death. This whole episode distinctly mirrors that of Sita, the

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[83] Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are about joint families. Bina Gupta notes, "Classical Hindu literature clearly attests to the fact that India's joint family system existed in India in antiquity. Accounts of family life given in the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata for example, prove without doubt that even in 1,000 B.C. the joint family system prevailed; and it has continued to do so in an unbroken pattern down through the millennia" (1994, 40). Interestingly, all the three novels I discuss in my thesis revolve around joint families. In Narayan's *The English Teacher*, Krishna's family is strictly speaking a nuclear family but for all practical purposes it is a joint family. In Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the anglicized Ipe family is a joint family, and in Roy's *Ministry*., wherever we see upper-middle class and upper-caste families they appear to be joint families. See the first section of Sheila Dhar's ([2005] 2016) memoir *Raga'N Josh* titled "Home." In Dewan ([1972] 2019) this term appears 596 times. See also Nehru (1946, 244), and Spivak ([1985]1994, 96).

[84] Drawing upon a range of ancient Sanskrit texts, Anastasia Piliavsky (2015) demonstrates that brahminic narratives show certain outcast communities as criminals or thieves who do not belong to a village or town. Rather, they live outside the village, on burial grounds, in groves or jungles—in spaces that are beyond "the ordinary, social, political, and moral pale" (329-330).

ideal wife of Rama, crossing the *Laxman Rekha* in the epic poem *Ramayana*.[85] Rama's brother Laxman draws a line every time he goes out of their hut in the forest to protect Sita from the demons. Sita stays within the boundaries of the hut marked by Laxman, but once, when she crosses the line to feed an ascetic who is actually a demon, Sita's life changes forever—the act of crossing the Laxman Rekha leads to her abduction and downfall. The idea of Laxman Rekha supports the myth that women should always listen to men (Banerjee 2008, 79).

The idea of crossing Laxman Rekha emerges even earlier, when Krishna reads English poetry to her, and Susila says, "I shall die of this poem some day. What is the matter with the woman loafing all over the place except where her husband is" (Narayan [1945]1993, 43). Susila censors women who wander without their husbands. After Susila disregards Krishna's proposal and goes alone to the lavatory, she is never the same. She falls sick and within days she dies. Susila's father says to Krishna, "Your mother-in-law is definite that if you hadn't allowed her to go into the lavatory, Susila would not have fallen ill" (83). This is the only time when we hear something about Susila's mother although she spends considerable time in the house. Although Susila disregards Krishna, everyone in the novel—Susila's parents and Susila herself—believe that women should not wander alone. In critical moments, Krishna communicates his thoughts via others. In this very slim novel, Susila is always at home, and when in public she is either with her husband or her father. Her seemingly small 'transgression' is given too much significance. It actually drives the plot in a way that recalls the *Ramayana.*

In the *Ramayana,* after Rama frees his innocent wife Sita from the demon Ravana and they return to their kingdom, Sita's situation changes. Rama never forgives her for crossing the Laxman Rekha. He says to Sita, "[I]t is not possible to live with a woman who has been with another man. It does not matter whether you are chaste or unchaste. Maithili [Sita], I can no longer take my pleasure from you, you are like the clarified butter which has been licked by a dog" (Bhattacharji 2002, 39). Both Susila and Sita lose their positions as wives for inadvertently crossing the Laxman Rekha. Curiously, both Krishna and Rama think of their wives in terms of purity and impurity. Krishna thinks of flies and disease and encroachers while thinking about Susila (Narayan [1945]1993, 151), whereas Rama imagines Sita's body as impure, licked by a dog or touched by the

[85] The story surrounding the Laxman Rekha is a powerful one. It warns women that even the goddess Sita paid a heavy price for inadvertently transgressing the line she was not supposed to cross. Even in present-day India, this deep-seated idea of the Laxman Rekha guides women's behavior. Advertising professional Swati Bhattacharya asks why we present women as paragons of virtues, and "as the gatekeepers of [their] family health" (2020, para. 1). She argues that women don't have to be good because it is this notion of the "good woman" that restricts women's lives (para. 3).

demon Ravana. The fear of pollution and non-brahminic others such as Untouchables and demons is central to the imagination of these brahminic men.

Brahmins enhance their caste purity **(**position**)** by accentuating Dalits' 'impurity' (abjection). Even in a brahminic home, where there are no Untouchables as such, the practice of untouchability still seeps into its four walls. Krishna talks about Susila's character only to underline some positive aspects of himself. He ascribes a range of negative attributes to her to intensify his own virtue. Whereas he sees himself as less worldly, i.e., as a Brahmin poet who enjoys reading and writing, he paints Susila as avaricious. He refers to her as "my cash-keeper" (37) who understands "perfectly where every rupee was going or should go, and managed them with a determined hand" (37-38). We are told that "[s]he kept a watch over every rupee as it arrived, and never let it depart lightly, and as far as possible tried to end its career in the savings bank" (44). Despite Narayan's use of humor, this dwelling on her housekeeping does not grant her agency, but has the effect of accentuating Krishna's generosity. Susila's handling of Krishna's monthly income is no indication of the power balance in their relationship. One can argue that this puts an additional burden of family logistics on her. He frames her not only as money-minded but also as "autocratic" (38) and physically not "demonstrative" (35). Even when Susila is on her deathbed, Krishna stresses her fixation with money, and thus amplifies his own generosity.

> But I liked it immensely. It kept me so close to my wife that it produced an immense satisfaction in my mind. Throughout I acted as her nurse. This sickness seemed to bind us together more strongly than ever […]. She said: "My father said he would give me five hundred rupees when I got well again...."
>
> "Very good, very good. Hurry up and claim your reward."
>
> "Even without it I want to be well again." There was a deep stillness reigning in the house but for the voice of the child as she argued with her grandparents or sang to herself. (81)

Here, the way Krishna talks about Susila's sickness and what her sickness is doing to him sounds morbid. He not only likes taking care of her "immensely," but claims that her sickness has brought them closer, giving "immense satisfaction" to his mind. It is an odd claim to make because there has been no major rift in their relationship, but it suggests something about himself–-that he feels closer to his wife in a nurse's role than in a husband's. Surprisingly, Susila, who has lain in bed for days, without eating and drinking properly, talks about her father's "reward." During her sickness, this is the only time she speaks. When Krishna hears this, he suggests that she should get well and claim

the reward, but when she responds to Krishna's untimely jibe by telling him that she wants to get well regardless of any reward, nothing follows her protest. Rather, Krishna abruptly thinks of her daughter, who is playing with her grandparents, and feels "a deep stillness reigning in the house."[86] The erasure of Susila's feelings occurs throughout the text. Krishna's talks with Susila during her illness either take the form of instructions or monologues:

> "Control yourself, child," I said. "Take this, you will be all right." After all the drink cooled, and she drank it, and smiled at me, I felt relieved. I sat down and caressed her forehead and asked: "Do you feel all right now? I will fetch the doctor." (71)

Here, again, not only does he speak condescendingly to her, but the narrative, without waiting for Susila's answer to Krishna's question "Do you feel all right now?," moves on to the next section of the novel's chapter. The text is reluctant to allow voices other than Krishna's. Subordinate characters like Susila and the maid, his mother and his in-laws, emerge as objects that must submit to Krishna. In Krishna's home and in Narayan's novel, only one consciousness seems to prevail. Every 'I' other than Krishna's is either ignored or treated as an object. Krishna embodies what Bakhtin (1984, 11) calls "a monological authorial consciousness," the creator and the character upholding a world in which the brahminic status quo reigns.

Access to, and control over, money does give Susila agency over others such as her maid and daily wage workers. One could argue that, at a more personal level, she uses this privilege to fill a void that haunts her brahminic marriage. Also, this agency over money is not real, since it is given to her by Krishna. At one point, when, on seeing grocery items, she seems to be "in raptures" (Narayan [1945] 1993, 40), Krishna feels pleased at seeing her thus, as though he can only satisfy her and make her happy via buying her groceries.

4. The Politics of Home

"A room all for myself where I can sit and spin out great poetry." I said.
"Well, some place where you can be free from my presence?" she asked. "Why don't be plain?" "No, no," I replied awkwardly.
"I'm not eager to thrust my company on you either," she said: "I am eager to have a separate room."'"In that case, I don't want one," I replied. "Why should both of us have separate rooms?" (51)

The full complexity of Krishna and Susila's home is unveiled when she falls sick and is confined to her room. The otherwise inscrutable Krishna appears perfectly clear and impeccable in the role of

[86] Krishna's sudden, odd meanderings, which appear repeatedly throughout the novel, indicate a repressed sexuality that I will explore later in this chapter.

caretaker. But even in this new role, the condescending husband in him keeps surfacing. Fearing that she might suffer discrimination, he feels sorry for her and regrets that their community will designate her as a "patient" once they know about her sickness, and says, "She would no longer be known as a wife or mother or Susila, but only as a patient! And all this precaution—was she an untouchable?" (Narayan [1945] 1993, 78). As the story unfolds, more than anyone else, Krishna himself reduces her by referring to her as a patient and by questioning the relevance of her role as a wife and mother after she has fallen ill. All these reductions make her a kind of outcast in a brahminic household. Like a commodity, the moment she stops functioning in her usual ways, she becomes a burden, an untouchable-like figure, and all certainties promised to her via marriage rites begin to crumble. Susila's sickness lays bare complex aspects of their relationship, traces of which we have glimpsed earlier. Now, to treat her and protect others, Susila is quarantined. We see her shivering, not wanting to eat, her spiking temperature, but we know nothing about her feelings and fears. No genuine conversation takes place between husband and wife, and he keeps the child away from Susila. The nurse in Krishna absolutely dominates the husband in him. He turns a small room into a patient ward and proudly claims that Susila's doctor "was tremendously pleased with the arrangement" (78) and that he had not seen such an "attractive sickroom" (78) in his whole life.

Oddly, while Susila is confined to her room, her child never insists on seeing her. Rather, Krishna claims that the child "conducted herself before her mother as if she were a stranger" (80), which seems unconvincing. How can a child turn so indifferent to her mother within a matter of a few days when earlier the child has been fully dependent on her? Krishna claims that the child only waits for the time when he will be "free of sickroom duties" (80), so that he can play with her. Even after Susila's death, she hardly ever talks about her mother. It seems that she instinctively understands what is expected of her and cannot help but chime in with the text's brahminic bias. Krishna uses the child as a prop to highlight his own virtues. When she is shown a photo album in her story class, she says: "This little tiger was quite lonely, you know, because her mother had been taken away by hunters—bad fellows" (137). She reflects on Krishna's loneliness**,** not on her mother's absence or death. Through such manipulations, the narrative removes Susila even from the memory of her child, by installing Krishna therein. Throughout Susila's sickness, and even after she dies, the text stresses Krishna's excellent caring nature, although the reader knows he has a maid and Susila's parents helping him. Like the maid, they hardly speak, and like her, they are always in the background nursing Susila (cleaning, changing clothes, sitting for long hours by her side, and taking night shifts). And yet, Krishna says that he follows an "iron routine" (79). His initial fear about society's attitude toward Susila's sickness is his own fear that he outsources to others.

Since Narayan's novel depicts the life of this brahminic couple in such a mild but controlled way, they do not lend themselves easily to analysis, and neither does Krishna's queerness nor the impact of his queerness on Susila. However, a seemingly mundane situation that occurs in the novel indicates the queer dimension of their relationship. Susila argues with him because he goes to a distant shop to buy groceries and ends up being cheated by the shop owner:

> I said: "There is nothing wrong with him. He is the best shop man known. I won't change him …." "I don't know why you should be so fond of him when he is giving under-measure and rotten stuff..." she replied. I was by this time very angry: "Yes, I am fond of him because he is my second cousin," I said with a venomous grin. (39)

What seems like Susila's innocuous accusation and Krishna's zealous defense, in retrospect, take on a serious meaning, suggesting a gulf between Narayan's ideal couple.

The entire episode around Susila's sickness brings out the full complexities of Susila's situation. Susila is locked up and asked to behave for her own good. Krishna refers to Susila as the "patient" (92) and to her room as the "sickroom." Even while speaking to Susila's parents, he says, "I looked at the patient. She had grown a shade whiter, and breathed noisily" (93). The reader never learns how Susila's parents respond to Krishna's use of the word "patient" with regard to their daughter. Every time Krishna makes an insensitive remark, the narrative transitions without allowing any space for Susila to respond. However, once when Susila ignores Krishna, he reads her defiance as her hallucination, not as her rebellion against him, her father, or even the doctor:

> "He [her father] wrenched my hand. Bad man. You must never leave my side hereafter."
>
> […] She tried to kick away the blanket. She attempted to roll out of bed. When I checked her, she was furious. "Why do you want to stop me? I want to go away."
>
> She held up her arms and asked: "Where is the baby?"
>
> "[…] They must not take away a small baby without telling me. They may drop it." I Understood what she meant. She was imagining herself in childbed […]. She still held up her arms for the baby. I gently put them down. After that she started singing. Her faint voice choked with the strain. I couldn't make out the words or the tune. I said: "Hush, stop it please. You must not sing. You will not get well if you exert yourself." But she would not stop. I protested, and she said: "I want to sing, and I will sing. Why should it offend you?"
>
> At night she ceased to sleep peacefully. She talked or sang all night. The doctor

> examined her more closely every time now. He examined her heart and said: "She must sleep. It is imperative […]." (90-91)

Now when sickness grips her, it also frees her. Rather than merely reacting to his provocations, now she initiates them: "Why do you want to stop me? I want to go away." Her question and her wish indicate her dissatisfaction with Krishna. For no apparent reason, she starts singing and flinging her legs. Krishna asks her not to exert herself, which first seems like a concerned gesture, but when he continues pestering her, it becomes apparent that her "delirious" movements discomfort him. He does not understand the song or recognize the tune and says her body has completely taken over her mind. But when he asks her to stop singing, she speaks with the utmost coherence: "Why should it offend you?" She has never confronted him in this way earlier. Could it be that her bodily gestures—singing out of tune, kicking her legs, holding up her arms[87]—indicate her suppressed rage against Krishna? Can we argue that Krishna's inability to comprehend her song is not only his but brahminic society's indifference toward women? As long as she "behaves" herself she is fine, but the moment she defies Krishna and blames her father and uses her body in "inappropriate ways," we hear the doctor say: "She must sleep [go]." Susila dies soon thereafter, and Krishna stoically accepts her death. In her sickness, she was a patient to him, and now, when her "stentorian breathing" (94) stops, she becomes, to him, a "soul going into freedom" (94). Krishna sees Susila as a "cash-keeper" (37), a "patient" (80), and a "soul," but never as a fully-rounded feminine figure. Susila becomes desirable only after she dies.

Only after Susila dies does the true nature of Krishna and Susila's marriage unfold. The way he mourns her death suggests his emotional detachment.

> We squat on the bare floor around her, her father, mother, and I. We mutter, talk among ourselves, and wail between convulsions of grief; but our bodies are worn out with fatigue. An unearthly chill makes our teeth chatter as we gaze on the inert form and talk about it. Gradually, unknown to ourselves, we recline against the wall and sink into sleep. The dawn finds us all huddled on the cold floor. (94)

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[87] Sara Ahmed (2017, 66-67) demonstrates how "willfulness" is expressed bodily, using the example of the willful arm that goes up, defying all forms of instructions and commands, thus registering its rebellion and unhappiness. It is striking how the figure of the arm, acting in inappropriate, unexpected ways, appears in Ahmad's and Narayan's works, the former cohering aspects of Susila's life which the latter absolutely mutes. See also Kishwar (1997). Kishwar presents Sita as a woman with agency, but the article, unlike Ahmad's exploration, seems less concerned with the question of woman's agency or gender equality. Rather it reads like a defense of brahminic culture even though it explicitly criticizes the epic hero Rama.

Someone who values personal space, now, experiences and expresses personal grief only in collective terms: “We mutter, talk among ourselves, and wail between convulsions of grief.” Not even once does Krishna use the pronoun “I” to mourn his wife’s death. Rather, he dwells on the communal “we,” as if there is no personal dimension to his grief. He also quickly gets used to the fact of her death and seems happy raising his child as a single parent while nurturing a male friendship he describes as **“**profound**”** (125) to the school headmaster who appears in Krishna’s life after Susila dies.

Despite the pressure to remarry, Krishna rejects the idea of remarriage. An acquaintance of Krishna’s mother says: “ ‘Men are spoilt if they are without a wife at home […]. A man must marry within fifteen days of losing his wife. Otherwise he will be ruined. I was the fourth wife to my husband and he always married within three weeks. All the fourteen children are happy. What is wrong?’ she asked in an argumentative manner” (99). The woman’s seemingly casual “what is wrong” assumes a more layered meaning when we see Krishna’s mother crying on seeing him taking care of the child as a single parent. She says, “I have never known such things in our family” (98). It is not clear what she means by that half-articulated lament, but it demonstrates that Krishna’s unorthodox choice to remain single is resented by his family and community. This time, however, not only does he reject the idea of remarriage, he also quits his college teaching job and considers taking up a teaching job at his daughter’s elementary school. In keeping with his character, the earlier Krishna who has never been keen on “setting up a family” rejects the idea of remarriage. Unlike before, his rejection of marriage is now socially acceptable because he has already followed his dharma by marrying and fathering a child. Whatever decisions he takes concerning family, marriage, or work, his choices are now considered to be pro-caste. Between queerness and balance (Brahminism), he chooses the latter.

Only after Susila dies does Krishna want to come into genuine contact with her, growing obsessed with her, wanting to communicate with her, desiring to touch her. Krishna’s grief, I argue, is engendered by guilt that has little to do with Susila. He says, “My mind kept buzzing with thoughts and memories. In the darkness I often feel an echo of her voice and speech or sometimes her moaning and delirious talk in sickbed” (99). Although Krishna mentions how thoughts and memories of Susila buzz in his mind, he does not make them explicit. What we see is that he only recalls her sickness, her delirious talk, her singing voice, and her seething questions, the last phase of her illness when she was least herself. However, when he does manage to talk to Susila’s spirit, the talk is never about her. Krishna hears everything he wants to hear: She says comforting things as if to absolve him and assuage his guilt, thus validating him. Susila’s spirit tells him she is happy

where she is and wants him to be happy as well: “The most important thing I wish to warn you about is not to allow your mind to be disturbed by anything. For some days now you have allowed your mind to become gloomy and unsettled. […] You must keep yourself in better frame … ” (152-153). This assurance is what he seeks from her. However, the content of these exchanges with his dead wife’s spirit brings his guilt into sharp focus. On the last page of the novel, Krishna finally makes his peace with Susila’s death, but the positive resolution he reaches with his deceased wife’s spirit is one-sided, attained by creating a mythical Susila who never existed.

5. Brahmin Men Walking at the Sarayu

“I and the headmaster walked down the river bank, sat on the sand, and watched the sunset” (146). (Krishna with his male friend)

“How often had she expressed a wish to walk along the river in moonlight, and for all the years of married life I had not been able to give her that fulfilment even once; some pointless thing postponed it every time; we never went out in moonlight at all. And this regret tormented me when I saw moonlight on water, that night ….” (158). (Krishna is thinking about his wife)

M. N. Srinivas**,** one of Narayan’s close Brahmin friends, reminisces on how Narayan’s wife’s death shattered Narayan. Since Narayan’s *The English Teacher* is his most “autobiographical” novel (Ramanan 2014, 128), the words of Mr. Srinivas and his friendship with Narayan align with the headmaster and Krishna’s friendship. Srinivas recounts Narayan’s shattered self following his wife’s death thus:

> I remember accompanying Narayan on a few of his walks around this time. They were not walking through the city but brooding, sad walks on the roads, skirting Kukkarahalli Tank to the west of the town. Narayan talked about death and after-life, and incidentally, his preoccupations expressed themselves in a few ghost stories. Sometime later he went to Madras and there met the medium through whom he was able to contact Rajam. All this is narrated elegiacally in *The English Teacher*. (Srinivas 1996, 29)

Although my focus is not on Narayan’s life, the way this quotation delineates two Brahmin men walking together—one mourning the loss of his wife, the other comforting him— recalls the way Krishna mourns his wife’s death, and his friendship with the headmaster. Somehow, both Narayan and his character Krishna seem to mourn their wives in ways that suggest their emotional distance. Narayan’s reflection on death and the afterlife falls more in the domain of brahminic philosophy than in the realm of personal grief. Elsewhere Narayan says, “We believe that marriages are made in

heaven […] not by accident or design but by the decree of fate" (quoted in Walsh 1982, 17). He then goes on to add that while "the eternal triangle" (17) may have significance for a Western writer, it is irrelevant to Indian writers because their social circumstances do not allow any room for the eternal triangle. In a perverse way, this turns out to be true because while Susila is alive there is no 'third' threatening Narayan's brahminic couple.

Considering the brahminic tenor of the novel, modern terms such as gay, bisexual, or queer do not lend themselves easily to its characters, even when Krishna and the headmaster's friendship exists in that space we can call 'queer.' The socio-cultural landscape of the novel is so brahminic and thus heteronormative that it is challenging to read its characters and situations queerly, even when they are queer. Bearing these complexities in mind, I want to examine the queer dimension of Narayan's brahminic male characters, Krishna and the headmaster. How do they achieve harmony in their lives, and what consequences does this have for themselves and for their wives? I will demonstrate how these two Brahmin men fulfill their quest for personal satisfaction through stealth and acts of violence.

Krishna's friendship with the nameless headmaster illuminates what remains buried in his marriage with Susila. As we compare his marriage with Susila to his friendship with the headmaster, we see two different Krishnas emerging: The opaque and mercurial husband of Susila transforms into a transparent and gentle friend of the headmaster. Unlike Susila, the headmaster is a source of delight for him. On his first meeting with the headmaster, Krishna feels that he is entering a "profound" relationship (Narayan [1945] 1993, 125). As we know more about the headmaster, we learn that, like Krishna, he is also a suitable boy. Both seek harmony in their lives while trying to uphold the brahminic status quo. When Krishna meets the headmaster for the first time, he is impressed by his altruism and innovative methods of teaching children, but is also beguiled by his physical features. The attention Krishna pays him seems unusual given that he has never observed his own wife with similar attentiveness:

> He was a slight man, who looked scraggy; evidently he didn't care for himself sufficiently. His hair fell on his nape, not because he wanted to grow it that way, but, I was sure, because he neglected to get it cut. His coat was frayed and unpressed. I liked him immensely. I was sure there were many things about him which would fascinate me. I was seized with a desire to know him. I asked him: "Please visit me some day." (125)

Krishna's "I liked him immensely" is bold. Never once does he utter such a simple and declarative statement about Susila. He sounds a different person when he exclaims: "I was seized with a desire to know him." It is a desire that, within just a page, makes Krishna invite the headmaster twice: " 'Come to my house on Sunday instead of coming here,' I said and he agreed, I had a feeling that I was about to make a profound contact in life" (125). Krishna's invitation to the headmaster suggests his unmediated-by-others desire. Conversely, Susila first comes to live with him only at the behest of others**.** As the story unfolds, we see how quickly Krishna's friendship with the headmaster develops. When Krishna visits his daughter's school and the headmaster leads him to the room where he rests, Krishna describes his experience thus:

> He took me into his room. It was thatched-roofed. Its floor was covered with clay, and the walls were of bamboo splinters filled in with mud. The floor was uneven and cool, and the whole place smelt of Mother Earth. It was a pleasing smell, and seemed to take us back to some primeval simplicity, intimately bound up with earth and mud and dust. (134)

The headmaster's dedication and his whole being make an impression on Krishna. His interest in the headmaster seems to take a sensual edge. He feels enchanted by the pleasing smell of the headmaster's room, his unkempt looks, his spartan existence, his being earthy, and his unconventional ways of being in the world. Although the narrative seeks to portray Krishna as a concerned (Brahmin) father visiting his daughter's school, he is seen pursuing the headmaster, and their meeting seems to last forever.

Later, we see them together at Krishna's house eating, which Krishna describes as "a most delightful party" (139). The atmosphere is pleasant, the child sits "nestling close" to the headmaster, and there is an atmosphere of happy familiarity in the air (139). Krishna serves the headmaster a *paan* or betel leaves and arecanut. While his friend chews the paan with "contentment" (141), Krishna notices his lips and eyes have turned red. Without his usual coat, to Krishna, the headmaster "looked rather young and slight. […] [T]here was a touch of freshness about him" (140-141). It is the child who first remarks on the altered appearance of her teacher, but it is Krishna who ruminates on it. While the headmaster refuses to eat bland food like eggplant, he savors the paan—a food associated with desire and pleasure in Indic traditions.[88] The *Kamasutra* recommends

[88] Ruth Vanita (2014) writes about the significance of *Pān* in Indic tradition. "Early Sanskrit texts mention the consumption of betel leaf among the eight enjoyments – incense, women, clothes, music, bed, and food. *Pān* occurs in the *Kamasutra* and the *Bhāgawatam*. Its origin is attributed to Ayurvedic physicians. It is supposed to be good for health and digestion. *Pān* is simultaneously sacred and erotic. It is part of religious rituals and offered to the gods. Lovers, including Krishna and Radha, are depicted feeding one another *pān*. It is used in many wedding rituals and distributed at wedding parties. Vatsyayana includes it

the use of paan to lovers, especially prior to kissing as paan gives fragrance to the mouth and supposedly increases desire (Vatsyayana [n.d.]1925, 18). This delightful gathering of two friends and a child stands in stark contrast to Krishna and Susila's evening talk, which involves only mundane things: The child is seen either sleeping or playing by herself, there is always an inscrutable heaviness in the air, and there are no offerings or consumption of paan. The one time we see Krishna eating, he is seen eating alone in rancor. The food is served by the maid while Susila is seen sulking in her room (Narayan [1945] 1993, 49-50). Although Susila and Krishna's talk fulfills all the criteria of normalcy, it lacks the delightfulness and ease of Krishna's friendship with the headmaster: They are seen eating, conversing, and enjoying each other's company in solitude. The presence of the maid and the child is neither threatening nor intrusive. It augments the pleasant atmosphere. The old maid cooks and keeps the house in order, and the child becomes an excuse on which Krishna and the headmaster nurture their friendship. Krishna notices with delight: "He seemed to feel more at home in my house than in his [with his wife]" (145). The headmaster tells him that they should be informal with each other. Putting his theory into practice, he tells Krishna about his family life and criticizes the institution of marriage and the "silly social customs" (140) that society imposes on its people. Decoding Krishna and the headmaster's conversation from a queer perspective presents clues as to how gay men negotiate negative socio-cultural spaces they are forced to inhabit. Whereas Krishna develops into a reluctant husband, the headmaster explicitly states that he has been forced into marriage: "I could have managed well as a bachelor, but they wouldn't let me alone" (140). Krishna finds his manner and the content of his speech "very appealing" (140).

Immediately after having found a close male friend in the headmaster, Krishna unexpectedly begins to converse with Susila's spirit, which, more than anything else, indicates his guilty conscience. His unexplainable listlessness, disappointment, and mood swings cohere when one looks at his meeting with Susila's spirit in light of his same-sex friendship. By invoking her spirit and talking to her, he resolves his inner conflict and mitigates his guilt.

> Do you know what a wonderful perfume I have put on! I wish you could smell it …. On second thoughts I had better not mention it because you will want to smell it and feel disappointed. Perhaps it may look like selfishness for me to be so happy here when there you are so sorrow-filled and unhappy.... It would hardly be right if I produced that

as one of the *solah shṛngār*— a cosmetic to redden the lips. It is an important part of both Hindu and Muslim life in India. Because it is associated with pleasure and eroticism, it is forbidden to celibate ascetics and students (*brahmachārī*). Above all, it is intrinsically and uniquely Indian" (Vanita 2014, 7). See also Anand (2018).

> impression. If I succeed in making you feel that I am quite happy over here and that you must not be sorry for me, I will be satisfied. Your sorrow hurts us. I hope our joy and happiness will please and soothe you … . (130)

Only as a spirit does Susila mention her perfumed body to Krishna. Now, when she offers herself to be savored, he is unable to touch her. Such sensual and flirtatious talk does not occur between them while she is still alive and can be touched. Also, suddenly, Susila's spirit claims that she is happy in her world, and it tells Krishna that instead of mourning her death he should pursue his happiness. She uses the collective pronoun "us" as if she were with someone else. Susila's "us" and her "joy and happiness" reveal only Krishna's state of mind. Susila's guilt for being happy while her husband is "so sorrow-filled and unhappy" is Krishna's because he is the one who is ecstatic about his male friend and who finds the earthy smell of his friend's room pleasing. These manipulative gestures indicate how desperately Krishna tries to be a suitable boy. However, he spectacularly fails to enact normative epistemological performative[89] that the whole brahminic society observes in some form to maintain caste order. Krishna continues to seek refuge in Susila's spirit, and she continues to tell him comforting things:

> You fret too much about the child. Have no kind of worry about her. When you are away at college, you hardly do your work with a free mind, all the time saying to yourself 'What is Leela doing? What is she doing?' Remember that she is perfectly happy all the afternoon, playing with that friend of hers in the next house, and listening to the stories of the old lady. Just about the time you return, she stands at the door and looks down at the street for you. And when you see her you think that she has been there for the whole day and feel miserable about it. How can you help it, you never pause to consider. Do you know that she sometimes insists upon being taken to the children's school, which is nearby? And the

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[89] Here I am applying Butler's idea of gender performativity to a brahminic concept called "samskara," which roughly means culture—everything one learns, and does, from childhood onward. The prefix sam means "well thought out", and kara means "the action performed or undertaken." By performing samskaras, one deposits a subtle impression in one's mindfield and thus forms culturally desirable habits. But in metaphysical terms, samskara takes a more specific meaning: it is connected to the deeds accumulated in previous births and thus with karma— a kind of priori, rooted in the supposedly timeless Vedas. Seen in this way, the stress on samskara produces a certain kind of subject who is both upper-caste and heterosexual. Texts such as Brahmanas, which are part of Vedas, give a detailed description of performing rituals and thus performing samskaras (Varma 2021, 62, 71). Samskara, says Devdutt Pattanaik, is that which gives akara or shape to your world. For more on samskaras, see Pandey (1969). See also U.R. Anatha Murthy's novel *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* (1976), originally written in Kannada, shows the centrality of samskaras in brahminic lives.

> old lady, whenever she is free, takes her there and she has become quite a favourite there? Why don't you put her in that school? She will be quite happy there. (119)

Susila's spirit not only acknowledges Krishna's concern for their daughter but it also suggests to Krishna that he should put Leela in the headmaster's school because she loves "that school." What Susila tells him is exactly what he wants to do and what, of course, he ends up doing. By imagining her saying these things, he clears his conscience.

Krishna's growing intimacy with the headmaster presents a personal transformation. Now he resents his mother's help and asserts: "God has given me some novel situations in life. I shall live it out alone, face the problem alone, never drag in another to do the job for me … . I found a peculiar satisfaction in making this resolve" (97). Never before has he shown such resolve. Earlier his mother and other relatives would come and go, but now when the headmaster is in his life he guards his space. Now he also seems to enjoy taking care of the child as a single father: "I slipped into my double role with great expertness. It kept me very much alive to play both father and mother to her at the same time" (97). When his mother leaves and proposes to take the child with her, Krishna refuses, and when the child asks her grandmother when she will visit again, Krishna tells her, "She can't come again for a long time, child; she has to look after grandfather ..." (98). While he himself converses with Susila's spirit, he does not want his daughter to live with any illusion. What he says to the child is most probably meant for the mother. When Susila was alive, Krishna never minded the presence of others but, rather, welcomed it. Now suddenly he needs utmost privacy.

Krishna's transformed self suggests his same-sex love, but it also brings out, retroactively, the small acts of violence that he committed against Susila, including belittling her on several occasions. Once, when Susila sees blue tiles in a restaurant and suggests they should use them in their living room, Krishna taunts her: "With pleasure, but not in the hall, they are usually put up only in the bathrooms" (54). He further adds, "Do you know they are used only in bathrooms in civilized cities; they are called bathroom tiles" (54). Even when this conversation is over, he keeps referring to the tiles, all the while judging her for her bad table manners. Later, when Susila wishes to walk at the riverfront, he mocks her, "My dear girl […] Lawley Extension is south and this river north of the town" (55). At one point, Krishna remarks that there is "an autocratic strain […] and unsuspected depth of rage" (38) in Susila (but the only people who show anger are Krishna and the headmaster). Toward the headmaster, his manner is radically different. Once, when after washing his face and hands the headmaster does not use a towel to dry them, Krishna sees this gesture positively without invoking any reference to the "civilized" world. Krishna's inverse responses to Susila and the headmaster demonstrate his singular interest in the male form, displaying his

same-sex desire at its most eloquent. Not only does he admire the headmaster, he worries that the headmaster's obsessive work schedule might affect his health. Such concern about his perfectly healthy friend recalls the maid's words concerning Susila's sickness when she says to Krishna, "[Susila] has been in bed for five or six days, what have you done?" (68) When Krishna tells her that he gave Susila medicine, she says, "That's not enough, you must ask a doctor to see her" (68). The maid hardly speaks but when she does, her intervention suggests Krishna's apathy toward Susila's critical situation. However, this sluggishness is completely absent in Krishna's attitude toward his friend. He shows concern and worries about the idea of his friend getting sick (134, 164).

Contrary to how they are portrayed as characters—progressive, reasonable, thoughtful—Krishna believes in spirits and the headmaster in fortune-tellers. Using spirits, Krishna seeks solace and approval from Susila's spirit while the headmaster, believing in horoscopes, plots an escape from his wife and children so that he can be with Krishna. The night before his assumed death, the headmaster visits Krishna and asks him to oversee his school and students. Krishna gives a lyrical account of this meeting: "The light from our bedroom illuminated a part of his face. I looked at it. He had the abstraction of a mystic rather than of a maniac. I could not contain myself any longer. And so I cried" (161). At no point does Krishna show similar tenderness toward Susila, neither during her sickness nor when they have arguments. Now he cries at the idea of his friend's death, and his communal "we" that he uses while mourning Susila's death is replaced by an individual and vital "I." Also, Krishna's phrase "our bedroom" here stands out because earlier when Susila is still alive, the reader sees every section of their house in detail: the courtyard, the kitchen, the bathroom, the living room, the patient room, and even the entrance gate, but not the bedroom, as if a bedroom has no place in this brahminic home. But now when he unexpectedly uses the phrase "our bedroom," does he mean himself and Susila who is already dead? Or, himself and his friend? Considering how much Krishna likes his friend's presence in his house, his self-proclaimed "profound" connection with him, and in their partaking of food and paan, a reader may sense not only a strong physical bond but also the queer use of space, which turns a room into "our bedroom" in Krishna's imagination, an awareness that Narayan's novel never reports. The tearful Krishna invites the headmaster to spend the night in his house, but the headmaster wants to spend the last night of his life with his family. Later, we learn that he spends the night alone at the Sarayu riverfront, and Krishna lies in his bed(room), awake and restless. The anguished Krishna goes to his friend's house early the next day, saying to himself that "[o]nly the sight of him safe and talking to me would satisfy me" (164). Not finding him there, Krishna conveys the incident of the previous night and tells the headmaster's wife about the prophecy, and she laments: "Ah, couldn't he have confided this in me, his wife?" (165) The wife's complaint reflects the confusion that women

experience as wives of suitable boys. Now when Krishna hears disparaging remarks about his supposedly dead friend, unlike himself, he seethes with a lover's rage: "I felt like wringing her neck—it seemed to offer an ideal grip with her hair knotted high up" (165). Only as a lover, not as a Brahmin husband, does Krishna emerge as a credible character.

As a husband, Krishna relies heavily on reason, especially in how he deals with Susila during her sickness, but as a friend and lover he submits completely to passion and belief. He trusts everything that the headmaster tells him about his wife, without questioning how a woman should act whose husband focuses all his attention on his school, spending "delightful" evenings with his male friends while neglecting his children and wife (139). Whereas the headmaster's utterly dismissive attitude might be related to his wife's belligerent behavior, his indifference toward the children indicates his lack of desire to be a family man. He is kind and sensitive to children at school, and to Krishna's daughter in particular, while he ignores his own children as if showing closeness to them will bind him to his wife forever.

Both seem estranged from their wives, and now after having found each other, as suitable boys, they embrace each other's fictions. Despite what the headmaster says about his wife and children, they seem to love him. When his wife learns that the headmaster is alive and has only renounced the worldly life, she pleads with him to come back. The headmaster's reaction is harsh: "Let her cry till she brings down the sky. I am going to treat myself as dead and my life as a new birth […] I wish I could change my face somehow, so that I could not be recognized ... " (166-167). More than revealing his wife's nature, his fury divulges his inner turmoil and the trauma he has inflicted upon himself as a suitable boy trapped in a heterosexual marriage. His reaction also recalls Krishna's equally odd "I will teach her a lesson" when Susila discards some old papers and a dilapidated clock. While both these men behave violently toward their wives over mundane matters, as suitable boys they show kindness toward each other. Completely ignoring the headmaster's flaws, Krishna voices his happiness on seeing him, and the headmaster replies to him with fervent sincerity when Krishna says:

> Didn't I say that it might be wrong?..." I gripped his hand and jumped about in glee. I am so happy...."
>
> "So am I," he said. "You have no idea how it has been weighing me down all these years, in spite of what I might have felt and said; it was like having cancer and knowing fully when you would be finished. It was a terrible agony stretching over years. I rejoice it is over. […] I can live free and happy." (166)

In these few lines, Krishna's sentences trail twice. Indeed, throughout the novel, Narayan relies heavily on ellipses. In the brahminic author's hands, these ellipses become a tool to control the narrative, to control what can and cannot be said, thus safeguarding the text so that no anti-caste idea or figure might infiltrate and disrupt the harmony of Narayan's (brahminic) Malgudi.

Although the headmaster has always resented his marriage, he begins to see it as "like having cancer" (166) and actually terminates it after he meets Krishna . Also, one may even view the headmaster's renunciation as more of a sexual than spiritual quest. The narrator in Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts* sums up the headmaster's situation when he comments on the novel's brahminic central character Chandran:

> He was different from the usual *sanyasi*. Others may renounce with a spiritual motive or purpose. Renunciation may be for them a means to attain peace or may be peace itself. They are perhaps dead in time, but they do live in eternity. But Chandran's renunciation was not of that kind. It was an alternative to suicide. Suicide he would have committed but for its social stigma. Perhaps he lacked the barest physical courage that was necessary for it. He was a *sanyasi* because it pleased him to mortify his flesh. His renunciation was a revenge on society, circumstances, and perhaps, too, on destiny. (1937 [2012], 166)

The headmaster's renunciation in *The English Teacher* is a suitable boy's revenge on his society's "silly social customs" (Narayan [1945] 1993, 140) that he does not name. Both brahminic men in their own ways deal with women who come into their lives via arranged marriages, not something that they pursue. They write any text they like on these women to satisfy their desire without disrupting caste norms: Susila dies because of the unhygienic practices of caste Others and because of being willful, and the headmaster's wife is abandoned because of her lowly nature.

Not only do Krishna and the headmaster reveal their queer desire for each other, albeit with extreme caution, they also show their latent caste prejudice. The narrative nowhere explicitly mentions the headmaster's caste, but it assigns him a symbolic brahminhood. Caste shapes how both these male characters categorize others: Whereas Krishna sees the headmaster as virtuous, the headmaster sees his own wife as inferior. Once when the headmaster complains about his wife, Krishna suggests that he should move his family to a better neighborhood, presuming that this might bring harmony to his friend's life. The headmaster says: "She will create just those surroundings for herself even in a palace […] because she will carry the same surroundings wherever she goes. You see, the trouble is not external" (Narayan [1945] 1993, 147). Here, the idea

that untouchability is something that is inherent in the body as a certain kind of *guna* or quality which cannot be altered or changed surfaces most explicitly**.** Also, while the headmaster uses words such as "pigsty," "gutter," "creatures," and "lower-class den" in relation to his children (147), he describes his wife as fat, ill-tempered, and irrational (144-145), thus constructing himself as a Brahmin and them as 'Untouchables.' This also makes matters easier for Krishna because now, without guilt, he can have full access to his friend—a desire also reciprocated by the headmaster who considers Krishna's home as his home, or as Krishna says, "He seem[s]] to feel more at my home than in his" (145). The headmaster's disdain for his wife and Krishna's quick and unquestioned acceptance of it carry traces of caste and homosexuality.

Without disrupting caste norms, the headmaster and Krishna create a comforting space for themselves in both a sexual and a caste sense. Without women in their lives, they are now free to follow their desire. By exercising their dominance over women and by creating women and caste Others as willful and abject, they construct themselves as impeccable Brahmins. As suitable boys, both Krishna and the headmaster marry: Krishna marries to produce the illusion of the ideal Hindu family, and the headmaster uses the same power by first marrying and producing children and then discarding them. Although Krishna and the headmaster create a space for their friendship to flourish without antagonizing caste norms, the construction of this space is marked by violence and forgetting. Narayan emerges as an authentic Indian writer not only when his work is read in a pro-brahminic way. Even a queer reading of the text ends up supporting Brahminism since it suggests the ways in which brahminic queer men can remain brahminic.

6. The Folding Figure of a Brahmin

Considering some aspects of the phenomenology of 'touch' on which the practice of untouchability rests, I would like to re-examine Krishna's character. This re-examination involves questioning Krishna's relationship with the headmaster discussed in the previous section. While, as a Brahmin, Krishna embraces his high-caste status, as a suitable boy, he resents heterosexual marriage which is an insuperable condition of brahminic masculinity. This contradiction is a serious one because brahminic communities view heterosexual marriage as their cardinal dharma in the same way in which they generally practice caste as their dharma. Krishna, as a brahminic suitable boy, suffers from these opposing forces, which tear him apart. To conform with his upper-caste community, he conceals his true self from others and thus alienates himself. Just as brahminic culture creates illusions of touch to safeguard its interests, as via the practice of untouchability, Krishna weaves similar myths to sustain himself via a heterosexual marriage. He has also shown himself to be an unreliable narrator on several occasions. I contend that his unreliability or myth-making is essential

to his survival in a brahminic culture that hinges on touch-based practices. I examine the psychic effects of touch-based practices on him, arguing that he deludes himself as regards his marriage and his male friendship to save himself from disintegrating. After making a few remarks on the meaning of 'touch' in the Indic thought that lends itself to the constitution of untouchability, I will elaborate on how it comes to harm the brahminic Krishna.

The *Rig Veda* refers to the human body as a "microcosmic reflection of the world" (*Suśrutasaṁhitā*), but also as a "self-enclosed space" existing in an antagonistic relation with the world (Glucklich 1994, 99). The body as a self-enclosed space marks its boundaries through the skin and experiences its separateness through the sense of touch. In Ayurveda, the skin is considered as an "external appendage" and takes double forms, like other sense organs. Sānkhya and Advaita Vedānta describe the body as gross (*sthūla śarīra*) as well as subtle (*sūkṣma śarīra*) body (Bhattacharya 2008: 165). This distinction between gross and subtle bodies also explains why the upper three brahminic castes call themselves *dvijas* or twice born[90] because, unlike the gross bodies of 'Untouchables,' they do not end when the body ends, but are reborn—hence the idea of rebirth. In Hindu mythology and folklore, skin is viewed as the primary site where the "fruition of sins committed in previous births" register (Glucklich 1994, 99). Through these conceptions and narrations, the subtle skin is viewed as a "map of character and moral disposition" (Sarukkai 2009, 41). All these explain how 'touch' comes to play such a central role in enforcing social exclusions and proscriptions and establishing caste through religious edicts and decrees. As in the shift from Brahman to Brahmin (see chapter II, 15-17), the upper castes permanently project the idea of gross skin onto the body of the Untouchable. Although upper castes do view themselves, things, and events as capable of uncleanliness, their impurity or untouchability is only temporal, unlike that of the Dalits, and can be removed through cleansing rituals, as prescribed by religious texts (Sarukkai 2009, 45). The everyday brahminic practice of untouchability induces shame and humiliation in Dalits, but the brahminic refusal to touch and to remain within the subtle skin to obey dharma means that they live in constant fear of pollution. The practice of untouchability thus causes feelings of revulsion, anxiety, and shame in people, irrespective of their caste status, that no one examines because examining it amounts to questioning caste and thus Hinduism.

Fear of pollution and of losing caste compels Krishna to follow caste norms that define marriage as dharma, a duty.[91] By marrying Susila, Krishna fulfills his duty, but it changes him. One

[90] See footnote 67

[91] According to Shastric Hindu law, every Hindu must marry: To be mothers were women created and to be fathers men. The Veda ordains that dharma must be practiced by man together with his wife and offspring (Manu [n.d.] 1991, 9: 96). He is only perfect who consists of his wife and offspring (9: 96). Those who have wives can fulfill their obligations in this world; those who have wives truly have a family life; those who have wives can be happy; those who have wives can have a full life (Vyasa [n.d.] 1883-1896, vol. 1:

negative and rather complex impact is seen when he begins to converse with Susila's spirit. The practice of untouchability through which a Brahmin turns the real presence of the Untouchable into an illusion emerges in its reverse form in the context of Narayan's brahminic couple: Krishna seeks to touch Susila's spirit that cannot be touched. The collective brahminic illusion of an Untouchable's untouchability showcases its hold in a totally unexpected manner. In other words, the trauma of not touching what he wants to touch, that is, his homosexuality, makes him take refuge in self-perpetuated illusions that allow him to preserve his individual self. Considered in this way, could it be that his friendship with the headmaster is a self-perpetuated, comforting illusion that he nurtures to quell the overwhelming heterosexual world that surrounds him? Krishna has met other headmaster-like figures even before he meets the headmaster. Since these male figures, including the headmaster, are predominantly presented through Krishna's words, I argue that these homoerotic friendships occur only in the alienated Krishna's mind, not to dismiss the analyses done in the previous section but to highlight the complex ways in which caste interpellates Krishna.

Krishna's interest in the headmaster is reminiscent of his interest in men who have appeared earlier in his life. Krishna takes a similar but subdued interest in Susila's doctor.

> "Usually, it is necessary. All these cases are alike. But I'll do it for your sake, professor … ." He drove down with me by his side to our house. He was most amiable and leisurely—an entirely different man outside the dispensary. He played with my child and gave her a ride on his shoulder, examined all the books on my table, proved to be a great book-lover and student of philosophy, and was delighted that we had similar tastes. He was overjoyed to hear that I also wrote. He had great reverence, he said, for authors as a class. He appreciated one or two pictures I'd hung on the wall. All this established such a harmony between us that when he came to examine my wife he seemed an old friend rather than the medical automaton of Krishna Dispensary. (Narayan [1945] 1993, 75)

Almost everything Krishna says about the doctor, he says about the headmaster. He finds the doctor amiable because he takes interest in Krishna's books and his daughter (two things that Krishna values the most) and thus in him. Here, Krishna studies the amiable doctor who "radiated health and cheer" (76), and while they talk, Susila's presence recedes. True to his character, Krishna says, "it was quite a thrill for us to hear the sound of his car every day" (76). His "us" can only mean him—how can the sound of the doctor's car thrill the terminally ill Susila?

176-177). In other words, it is a sacred union that cannot be dissolved in this life or in future lives on any ground. See Diwan and Diwan ([1972] 2019, 63-66).

When Susila's condition deteriorates and the doctor begins to pay a daily visit, Krishna indulges in an unexpected thought process:

> My wife had given up attempts at tidying up my room, and it had lapsed into the natural state of my hostel days. Once again all Milton and Shakespeare and Bradley jostled each other in a struggle for existence. […] I realized that I used to read better when I was in the hostel and had not become the head of a family. Nor were my hours spent in chatting with my wife or watching the child play or in running about on shopping errands. (66-67)

Here, triggered by the doctor's visits, Krishna broods on his life, showing himself to be a reluctant husband, forced into the role of a householder by his family. Now oddly, he thinks about his messy but productive hostel days—days when he could be himself and do the things that brought him satisfaction (5). It seems that by transforming his wife into a patient, by turning her room into "the most attractive sickroom" (78), Krishna wants to regain that hyper-masculine male hostel space in which he can savor "Milton and Shakespeare and Bradley" and "jostle[]" freely with men and boys.

However, Krishna's feelings about the doctor are one-sided. The doctor's interest in Krishna's household is purely professional, and if there is anything more to his manner, it may have something to do with Susila. The doctor's interest in Krishna's books and his daughter may be his way of showing his interest in Susila. Unlike Krishna, the doctor demonstrates remarkable sensitivity toward Susila. He tells jokes to make her laugh. The only time Susila genuinely laughs is during her sickness. This is also the only time in the novel that Susila comes in close proximity to a male other than her husband and father. Also, whereas the doctor seems friendly and cheerful in a home space, at his clinic he acts, as Krishna notices, like "an automaton" (77). After Susila dies, the doctor, in whom Krishna has seen "an old friend" (75), disappears.

Krishna's measured sexual interest in, and myth-making about, men suggests his loneliness and delusion. Since he performs the role of a husband/widower in the public domain, in the private realm he imagines having a male friend to nourish himself. On several occasions, Krishna has shown that he can deal with the world without disrupting its order, either by repressing his desire or by projecting his complexities onto others, which indicates his brahminic fear of violating caste norms. By making him converse with Susila's spirit and thus portraying him as an ideal Brahmin husband seeking a spiritual union with his deceased wife, the narrative erases, albeit unsuccessfully, the corrosive impact of caste on Krishna. At one critical point, when he meets the headmaster following his wife's death, he feels conflicted about his social self and individual self, each pulling him in different directions and thus torturing him, causing him to consider suicide: "I sat alone at a

corner of the river. A long dip in this river, or a finger poked into a snake hole—there are two thousand ways of ending this misery" (151). He has this extreme reaction after meeting the headmaster. Suddenly, he reminisces about Susila: "I recollected her pale face, with the flies on it, and the smile on her lips, and broke down at the memory" (151). He had not reacted in such a visceral way during Susila's sickness, nor at the time of her death. Even now when he thinks of her death, he immediately launches into self-pity: "This is also my end. Oh, God, send me to those flames at once. I saw a picture of myself being carried there and the funeral ceremonies. And this vision seemed to give me a little peace" (151). Whereas he is here cast as an ideal husband grieving his wife's death, we also see a man feeling crushed by norms that frame only caste-appropriate heterosexual desire as touchable. All these inner conflicts emerge after he finds a soul mate in the headmaster because before meeting the headmaster, he had given several indications that suggest he had reconciled with Susila's death:

> I read a lot, I wrote a lot […]. I spent a great deal of my time watching the children at play or hearing him narrate his stories for the children as they sat under the mango tree in the school compound. When I sat there at the threshold of his hut and watched the children, all sense of loneliness ceased to oppress, and I felt a deep joy and contentment stirring within me. I felt there was nothing more for me to demand of life. The headmaster's presence was always most soothing […]. My mind was made up. I was in search of a harmonious existence and everything that disturbed that harmony was to be rigorously excluded, even my college work." (177-178)

But this rigorous exclusion that he seeks for personal harmony not only hints at his chronic inner struggle with himself, but becomes his guiding force after he meets the headmaster. He forbids his mother to interfere in his life. He poses himself to be a forlorn father and widower, but his actions show that he is enjoying raising the child as a single father and, as a single man, pursuing his friendship with the headmaster. But this pleasure also produces guilt in him. As a consequence, he feels haunted by Susila's memories: "Thus days followed, bleak, dreary, and unhappy days, with a load on the mind. I felt as though I had been filled with molten lead" (151). His sudden, intense reaction arguably manifests something far deeper that has more to do with his friend and himself than with his wife's death. His reaction also seems connected with the epistemology of caste violence against Dalits which is analogous to the violence experienced by sexual outcasts, like Krishna himself, who share a complex relationship with the brahminic community. By submitting to norms and by not pursuing desire, Krishna encloses himself. Also, the image of a human body

"filled with molten lead" falls more in the domain of caste violence[92] than in the realm of mourning, longing, or grieving.

Krishna's sitting at the Sarayu river, contemplating suicide after his wife's death recalls Lord Rama of Valmiki's *Ramayana* in which, after losing his wife, Sita, Rama disappears into the river Sarayu. Whereas the *Ramayana* gives reasons for Rama's regret and inner turmoil, Krishna's intense inner conflict, even though present, remains vague. Like the epic hero, Krishna atones at the riverfront. In the brahminic tradition, rivers or "river-goddesses" have a distinct religious significance: They can wash away all sins.[93] Seen thus, Krishna has devolved in his own eyes and goes to the river to expiate his sin, which seems connected to his relationship with the headmaster. Neither during Susila's sickness nor when she dies does Krishna seem particularly affected, but the arrival of the headmaster in his life triggers desire and happiness on the one hand and revulsion and guilt on the other. He is seen as living a widower's or *brahmachari's* life, looking after his daughter, in his community, but in his own estimation he seems troubled by his same-sex desire for the headmaster, a kind of adharma. Overwhelmed by a sense of adharma, he encounters himself as a sexual outcast. Curiously, Krishna, being a Brahmin, imagines self-mutilation or torture via "molten iron" in ways that evoke images of punishment which a pro-brahminic text like the *Manusmriti* codifies only for Untouchables.

Krishna's "folding" self or alienation may seem unrelated to the practice of untouchability, but a deeper probe will show how untouchability penetrates brahminic lives**.** Sarukkai explains how the practice of 'un/touchability' generates Brahmins and Dalits in society:

> When I reach out to a mirage and try to grasp the object I see in the mirage I realize through the failure of the act of touching that the vision I see is actually a mirage. In the case of untouchability, an interesting reversal takes place: when I see an Untouchable I can see him but I do not reach out to him. I cannot use my sense of touch to validate the vision that I see. But I do not have the same kind of doubt that I have about a mirage. The Untouchable is real but through the denial of touch he is made into a mirage—this is the illusion of touch. (Sarukkai 2009, 44)

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[92] See Yadav (2003, 16-20)

[93] In Narayan's fictional town Malgudi located in South India, the river Sarayu flows in all its glory, but it is a north Indian river. Also, the name of Sarayu appears several times in the *Ramayana* and also in the *Rig Veda*, and thus it holds a very status among key brahminic texts along with other but now extinct, rivers such as Sarasvati and Sindhu. The *Rig Veda* (X: LXVI) says, "Let the great streams come with their mighty help, Sindhu, Sarasvati and Sarayu with waves. Ye Goddess Floods, ye moth all, promise us water rich in fatness and balm." See Griffith's (1896) translation of the *Rig Veda*. See also Habib's article that challenges the brahminic myth surrounding the Sarasvati river as "nothing but castle in the year" (2001, 69), and yet the river's significance in brahminic culture persists.

Sarukkai's take on the construction of an Untouchable explains how caste seeps into a brahminic home. When Krishna's wife is alive, lives in close proximity, and can be touched, he does not show any desire toward her. By not touching her, or not wanting to touch her, he turns her into a mirage, which, in the phenomenological sense, amounts to murdering her, but such an action is not without consequences because by not touching her, he is not experiencing life and thus diminishing himself. However, it can also be argued that the choice to touch or not to touch, an ultimate indication of man's agency in a brahminic home, only resides with him, not with his wife.[94] Such complicated strands of 'un/touch' that mark Krishna's marriage unfold in a strikingly straightforward manner in his friendship with the headmaster. Krishna finds the headmaster fascinating, notices his reddened lips (Narayan [1945] 1993, 141), relishes the earthy smell of his room (134), serves him paan or betel leaves and arecanut (141), and feels that he has established a profound contact with him (125). Through his desire to touch and to savor him, Krishna submits to and thus endorses the non-normative domain of sexuality that his community never acknowledges. Seen in this way, Narayan's Brahmin Krishna lives in a space difficult to inhabit.

The novel ends on a brahminic note. Krishna resolves his personal crisis without disrupting brahminic order. Narayan takes the reader on a highly selective guided tour through Krishna's brahminic household and uses every means—characters, situations, conflicts—to present Krishna sympathetically, and as he goes on to develop this character he aligns the reader to brahminic India.[95] Narayan uses his characters as objects that fulfill his preordained demands. Krishna appears to be a type of hero whose discourse about himself is a discourse about caste. Without taking any strong anti-Dalit positions, or explicitly expressing pro-brahminic sentiments, Narayan nevertheless manages to construct an authentic (brahminic) India. However, the world that Narayan creates is problematic not because he focuses on brahminic lives, but because he erases non-brahminic Others to sustain the brahminic status quo. Any contemporary Dalit or queer reader of Narayan's work will either see himself absent or demonized. Narayan is not alone in this practice, but unlike other writers, he espouses "brahminic India" as the India——all heterosexual and upper-caste. What makes him so resoundingly authentic in the brahminic imagination is that he imbues everyday life

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[94] Vedic texts allow men to observe Brahmacharya as dharma, but they withhold the same right from women. Gandhi's vow of celibacy, for example, was the ultimate manifestation of his agency over his wife, but in brahminic discourse, it is not seen as such because gender-based inequality is woven into dharma. See my discussion on Gandhi in chapter II.

[95] Narayan claims that he is apolitical and that he detests "polemics and tract-writing," but elsewhere he has said that "all imaginative writing in India has had its origin in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the ten-thousand-year-old epics of India," which is equivalent to saying that all imaginative writing in India is rooted in Brahminism. The apolitical writer betrays his brahminic enthusiasm by saying that the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are "ten-thousand-year-old texts" (Narayan 1989, 14-15).

with caste, exactly as manifested by present-day Indian society. Ultimately, his hero finds inner equilibrium and adjusts, but his adjusting to a profoundly "sick" society can never be a measure of his psycho-social well-being.[96]

The dominant acceptance of Narayan's authenticity as an Indian writer in brahminic discourse is an endorsement of Brahminism. His Malgudi is far from being a representative microcosm of India. Rather, it embodies caste. I conclude this chapter by giving a brief examination of the name "Malgudi" whose complex associations in Hindi will serve to sum up some of the conclusions that I have demonstrated via the close reading of the novel. The problematics of caste and sexuality are embedded in the very conception of Narayan's Malgudi, literally meaning a "goods train" (Sen 2004, 143), a locomotive that brings things from elsewhere and thus sustains Narayan's Malgudi or his microcosmic India. The first part of the compound word Malgudi, 'mal,' carries caste meanings, both literal and metaphoric. When 'mal' is pronounced as 'maal' as in Malgudi it refers to all kinds of goods and food items, but when pronounced as 'mal' it means 'dirt' 'filth' 'evil.' This distinction between mal (filth and dirt) and maal (something good and desirable) is also at the core of the Brahmin and Dalit binary. Whatever is 'maal' or is perceived as 'maal' is also on its way to becoming 'mal' but since Brahmins so adamantly outsource whatever they find revolting in themselves to the bodies of the Untouchable, Narayan's Malgudi, too, tries to negate the 'mal' contained within the word 'maal.' In Hindi, the word mal means 'gand.' Several versions of this word as *ganda* (filthy), *gandagi (filth, dirt, excrement), gaand* (anus), *goonda*[97] (a violent, aggressive, and transgressive male), *gandu* (a term frequently used to describe homosexual men) assume a negative meaning in both a caste and a sexual sense. In the same way in which Narayan's novel foregrounds its brahminic characters, etymologically his word "Malgudi" only highlights 'maal.' While Narayan presents brahminic lives and caste-appropriate marriages as maal, he frames queer sexualities, non-brahminic people, and even heterosexual unions that are not mediated by caste in terms of filth, harmful effects of which I have shown through the example of Krishna's brahminic home.

In the chapter that follows, I discuss a brahminic family in the context of caste and sexuality, not only by examining one central male character but all upper-caste male and female

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[96] Dalit activist and lawyer B. R. Ambedkar wrote, "I shall be satisfied if I make the Hindus realise that they are the sick men of India, and that their sickness is causing danger to the health and happiness of other Indians" [1936] 2014, 185).

[97] In his essay "What Mrs. Beshara Saw: Reflections on the Gay Goonda," Lawrence Cohen uses the free-floating, highly hetrosexualized, ever-present figure of the "goonda" from the street to the bedroom of a brahminic family, queering its meaning further. Cohen comments on Indian marriages in which wives live with gay goondas or " 'gay husbands' in a society where marriages are often arranged and divorce is frowned upon" (2002, 149).

intergenerational characters. What Narayan, as a brahminic writer, seems to contain in *The English Teacher,* set in pre-independent India, Roy, as an anti-brahminic writer, explodes and exposes in *The God of Small Things*, set in independent India on its way to becoming a post-globalized India.

IV
Queer Manifestations

Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* ([1997] 1998) hinges on the Indian caste system. Unlike Narayan, Roy brings caste to the foreground. Whereas the novel is widely read and commented upon for its "commercial success, literary merit, and social critique" (Lemaster 2010, 789), the interface of sexuality and caste that occurs in it is largely ignored. Upper-caste scholars discuss the Dalit humiliation that takes place in the novel, but without considering its impact on upper-caste people in both a caste and a sexual sense. This obliviousness to self reflection not only indicates the powerful hold caste has over brahminic culture but also explains why, in a brahminic context, caste identities take precedence over sexual identities. Therefore, Roy's seemingly queer upper-caste characters appear to grapple with caste and desire: If they keep caste they have to regulate desire; if they claim desire they lose caste. Seen in this way, caste seems to have far-reaching consequences for its adherents, irrespective of their gender, sexual orientation, or rank in the caste hierarchy.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler demonstrates that every subject formation involves subjection. That one is dependent on power for one's very formation, and that formation is impossible without dependency. Butler writes, "The 'I' emerges upon the condition that it deny its formation in dependency [...]. The 'I,' however, is threatened with disruption precisely by this denial, by its unconscious pursuit of its own dissolution through neurotic repetitions that restage the primary scenarios it not only refuses to see but cannot see, if it wishes to remain itself " (1997a, 9-10). Butler's theory of subjection or subject formation can be used in a broader brahminic context in which the struggle between caste and sexuality is at once a symptom of caste and a sign indicating its persistence and perpetuation**.** No matter how alien and different Brahmin and Dalit may seem to be to each other, the trace of how they emerge as Brahmins and Dalits remains. This also applies to the construction of heterosexuality as sacred and of non-normative sexualities as abject. Such ordering and taxonomies establish caste-order, but they also produce what Butler calls, "a psychic excess"(1997, 198), or a lack that distorts and diminishes brahminic and non-brahminic people at the most fundamental level. If caste violates Dalits, it also damages upper-caste communities that enforce caste. Using Roy's novel, I will explore the queer aspects of her

brahminic characters and thus examine how the artificial alliance of desire and caste impinges on upper-caste characters. Although the story revolves around the cross-caste sexual transgression of a Dalit man and an upper-caste woman and thus heterosexuality, it also illustrates how the regulation of desire queers the assumed sacredness of normative sexuality. Caste confines Roy's characters, albeit differently, but they also resist these confinements. By capturing scenes of resistance and instances where characters show their conflicted selves, the narrative hints at their potential queerness. Examining these instances, I will demonstrate the interplay of caste and desire and how it upholds brahminic order.

Even though the presence of caste in modern-day India is undeniable (Roy 2011, 17), it has the inbuilt tendency to hide, especially in connection with sexuality. Yet all major discussions around sexuality seem to dissociate it from caste. Postcolonial theorists (Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Dipesh Chakrabarty) have comprehensively written on the evils of colonialism in India, but they have hardly touched upon the internal brahminic colonization of Dalits. Even recent theorists (Homi Bhaba, Arjun Appadurai) are largely concerned with issues such as globalization, immigration, and hybridity that concern upper-caste Indians, but have little bearing on Dalits. Postcolonial theorists have not engaged adequately with caste, either separately or with its interface with sexuality. By using words such as "subaltern," "common man," "masses," and "peasants," they erase the specificity of caste. Roy asserts that "for many of the best-known Indian scholars, caste is at best a topic, a subheading, and, quite often, just a footnote. By force-fitting caste into reductive Marxist class analysis, the progressive and left-leaning Indian intelligentsia has made seeing caste even harder" (Roy 2014, 23). In Roy's novel, the narrator expresses similar sentiments in the context of the brahminic erasure of caste:

> The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from *within* the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy. ([1997]1998, 66-67)

The narrator mentions caste's interface with communism, but one can include any number of 'isms' that caste has encountered without ceding its core features. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, an erudite Brahmin scholar, wrote that while India has survived long, debilitating periods of colonialism, no external force or influence could weaken "Hinduism's supremacy," or the grip of caste, attesting to

its resilience (1927, 12). Ashis Nandy, a leading socio-political psychologist, arrives at similar conclusions about caste, upholding it, albeit in a much-controlled manner, suppressing the link between caste and violence against Dalits while discussing theories of oppression and European colonialism (2012; 1995). What seems like a great socio-cultural feature to brahminic scholars like Radhakrishnan and Nandy appears very different to those like Roy (2004) and Ambedkar ([1946] 2002) who examine caste from the Dalit perspective.

In postcolonial scholarship, not using locally understood caste-specific words such as Brahmin, Dalit or Harijan amounts to caste erasure. The use of the word "subaltern" by the Subaltern Study Group indicates a brahminic tendency to evade caste, but to underscore colonialism. Referring to this tendency, Gopal Guru notes that the upper-caste elite, both in theory and practice, use liberal democracy to expand their power and influence, but they do not seem to be in favor of expanding its benefits to marginalized Dalit groups (2011, 99). In addition, even the queer theory that focuses on India uses caste as a mere buzzword. Vanita and Kidwai's landmark study *Same-Sex Love in India* (2001) completely overlooks caste.[98] Both queer and postcolonial scholarship seem to have largely reflected the concerns of upper castes, and thus circumvented the question of brahminic colonization of subordinated castes. Such strands of caste in discourse point to its wide reach and scope, but in this chapter I primarily examine how caste epistemologies inform non-normative sexualities. I begin with the reception of Roy's novel in India, and in the next two sections, I discuss how caste marks social spaces as 'touchable' and 'untouchable' and governs class and gender relations. In the last two sections, I discuss how the interplay of caste and sexuality shapes the upper-caste characters.

1. The Text and the World

When *The God of Small Things* first came out in India, it caused an uproar. The Syrian Christian community in Kerala found the book "repulsive, demeaning and offensive to their sense of public decency" (Iype 1997, para. 3). Sabu Thomas, a lawyer from Kerala, on behalf of his community, slammed charges of obscenity under Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code against the novel**.** He claimed that the sexual passages in the novel were an affront to Indian culture and that they "deeply hurt the Syrian Christian community on whom is [sic] the novel based" (quoted in Ipye 1997, para. 5). What the petitioner and his community found "objectionable and obscene" was the copulation scene between a Brahmin woman and an 'Untouchable' man. The charge is framed in a language

[98] Indian queer theorists such as Madhavi Menon's *Infinite Variety: A History of Desire in India* (2018), Ruth Vanita and Salim Kidwai's *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (2001), and Raj Rao and Dibyajyoti Sarma's *Whistling in the Dark* (2009) have largely ignored caste. When they talk about the history of sexuality or LGBT rights, they focus mainly on brahminic India. See also

that conceals the caste aspect of the objection. They argued that the sexual scenes might "excite sexual desires and lascivious thoughts" (para. 8) among the youth, without acknowledging that the core of their objection was tied to the inflammatory cross-caste sexual transgression. Even in the realm of fiction, cross-caste sexual transgression offended the Syrian Christian community. Since caste boundaries sustain social order in the brahminic understanding of the world, it is assumed that if cross-caste transgressions are not penalized**,** social order will collapse. Therefore, when anti-caste forces arise, caste rules are enforced to uphold the status quo.[99] The sex scene between Ammu and Velutha is taken as a direct assault on the brahminic culture and its assumed divinely sanctioned hegemony, but no one is perturbed by Rahel and Estha's incest.

Referring to this anomaly in the brahminic community's response to the cross-caste sexual scene between Ammu and Velutha, but not to the incest scene between Estha and Rahel, Brinda Bose writes:

> For its eventual social visibility […] the Ammu-Velutha relationship is preordained to die. For the fact that the Rahel-Estha incest is conducted in the (social) invisibility of a family home […]. However, if one were to link desire to the death-penalty, then on some sort of measuring scale the Ammu-Velutha union would be positioned higher—viable because die-able—than the process by which the closeness of the twins' 'Siamese souls' culminates in the sexual solace that Rahel offers Estha for his unspeakable pain. (Bose 1998, 67)

The hostile response to the cross-caste sex scene, together with a passive acceptance of the incestual act divulges the complexity of caste with regard to sexuality. The punishment of sexual transgressors is according to the danger they pose to caste order. The brahminic community in Kerala ignores the incest scene because Estha is feminine and therefore non-threatening. In common parlance, effeminate men like Estha are denigrated as hijras.[100] So even though Estha and Rahel commit incest, it is assumed to be a sterile act that has no consequences for the caste order as no sexual crossing occurs over from the domain of touchables to Untouchables, which upper castes enforce to maintain caste purity. In addition, the incest between Rahel and Estha seems surreal**.**

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[99] See "Dalit Atrocities," a webpage at *Scroll.in.* that archives incidents of upper-caste violence against Dalits throughout India. See also Kunwar Pal Singh's thesis where he concludes that "in every instance of anti-Dalit violence, the violence was preceded by some actual or perceived change in the status quo initiated by Dalits. And that actual or perceived change was used by the higher castes as a justification of anti-Dalit collective violence" (2000, iii).

[100] Any deviation from normative gender roles is despised. While effeminate men are ridiculed and harassed, 'hijras'—an umbrella term for eunuchs, intersex or transgender people—experience extreme hostility. See, Dutta (2018), Revathi (2016, 2012), and Tripathi (2015).

Although sexual, it appears to be more therapeutic: "Only that there were tears. Only that Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons. […] Only that they held each other close, long after it was over. Only that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief" (Roy [1997] 1998, 328). They 'touch' each other not to seek pleasure but to heal the trauma their bodies carry, to reclaim their snapped childhoods.

The brahminic opposition to the book exposes the upper-caste community's gnarled caste sense, as it shows its fury at the cross-caste sex scene while remaining indifferent to violent upper-caste marriages and the practice of untouchability depicted in the novel. In addition to the brahminic disdain for cross-caste sexual transgression, the opposition to the book reveals the collective upper-caste gender-based prejudice. Ammu's genuine relationship with Velutha is deplored, but Chacko's abuse of lower-class/caste women is accepted as the norm**.** Had Ammu only sexually abused Velutha and acted like Chacko she would not have suffered the wrath of her family, and the Syrian Christian community would not have been offended by the novel. The Aymenem village's caste-based anxieties mirror the Syrian Christian community's wrath. When Velutha and Ammu's transgression is known, Velutha's ('Untouchable') father shares the Ipe family's outrage and pledges to kill Velutha for defying caste norms. Later, when Mammachi meets Velutha, she spits on him and threatens him: "If I find you on my property tomorrow I'll have you castrated like the pariah dog that you are! I'll have you killed!" (284). Velutha's father's rage and Mammachi's visceral disgust toward Velutha invade their bodies in a similar way. Even though this rage is expressed differently, it produces equal unrest in the brahminic woman and the 'Untouchable' man.

Whereas the book was well-received internationally, it was criticized especially in Kerala where the novel is set, and not only by the Syrian Christian community. Roy's novel is condemned for misrepresenting Indian reality for Western consumption. While one senior Communist Party of India (Marxist) ideologue, P. Govinda Pillai called the novel "a squint-eyed view of Kerala reality which suits the prejudices of the Orientalist west" (Kerala 1997, para. 4), Kerala chief minister E. K. Nayanar accused Roy of **"**spewing anti-communist venom" (para. 1). These reactions reveal the collective brahminic paranoia against the novel. Anyone who challenges caste is ridiculed, punished, ostracized, and also killed (Doshi 2018; Mondal 2017; Ranganathan 2015). In the novel, the Ayemenem village punishes Velutha and Ammu for breaking the "Love Laws" (Roy [1997] 1998, 33). The Syrian Christian community in Kerala goes into a similar mode[101] to punish Roy for writing an anti-caste book and thus questioning caste order.

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[101] Since the publication of Roy's first essay "The Great Indian Rape Trick" (1994) which she wrote before *The God of Small Things* ([1997]1998), threats of court cases and charges of sedition by the state as well as the upper-caste groups have followed her.

The objection raised by upper-caste communities in Kerala is not very different from the Ayemenem village's objection to Ammu's transgression. (Like her character Ammu, Roy as a public figure is not a stranger to public ridicule and state hostility.) When, after Velutha's wrongful imprisonment, Ammu goes to the police station to give her testimony, the inspector, rather than recording her statement, refers to her as "*veshya*" (8) and taps her "breasts with his baton; it was not a policeman's spontaneous brutishness on his part. […] It was a premeditated gesture, calculated to humiliate and terrorize her. An attempt to instill order into a world gone wrong" (260). Later, Ammu, in her dream, sees the so-called loose women or prostitutes loitering in the streets and the policemen chasing them to cut their hair, "the women with vacant eyes and forcibly shaved heads in the land where long, oiled hair was only for the morally upright" (161). While Ammu's dream reflects the rampant misogynistic practices in present-day India, it is rooted in the history of caste (Ghosh 2009: Mandrayar 2005; Mehta 2005, 2008; Pathak and Tripathi 2016). Roy, although admired within India and abroad, has been frequently hounded by the media, called names on television, and threatened with court cases and imprisonment which, according to Roy, are meant to keep her "destabilised" (Roy 2011, para. 11). Such premeditated gestures by the state reveal the brahminic unwillingness to examine caste.

The God of Small Things carries the blueprint of her later works, both fiction and non-fiction, which relentlessly question brahminic hegemony. The threats of physical violence and court cases emerge from both upper-caste groups and state institutions. In an interview Roy says, "[S]ome have accused me of giving 'hate-speeches,' of wanting India to break up. On the contrary, what I say comes from love and pride […]. It comes from wanting to live in a society that is striving to be a just one" (Roy 2010, para. 3). Asking pro-equality questions is perceived as being anti-India. In the same interview, she says, "Pity the nation that has to silence its writers for speaking their minds. Pity the nation that needs to jail those who ask for justice […] while those who prey on the poorest of the poor roam free" (para. 3). These multiple strands surrounding the reception of the novel testify to Roy's account of caste in India.

2. The Ayemenem House and the Centrality of Brahminism

In this section, I discuss how caste shapes spatial segregation, and how ideas of brahminic 'purity' and Untouchable's 'impurity' inform spatial arrangements in the Ayemenem village. I will analyze Roy's characters' relationship to space in the broader context of debates surrounding space as they emerged in the works of Gandhi and Ambedkar.

Caste exerts itself through spatial segregation in *The God of Small Things.* The Ayemenem house exudes brahminic power and stands in complete contrast to Velutha's (untouchable) hut on

the other side of the river. The Ayemenem house is a citadel of privilege—"a tottering fiefdom with an epic of its own" (Roy [1997]1998, 13). Velutha's shed is emphatically impoverished. It has one "corner for cooking, one for clothes, one for bedding rolls, one for dying in" (206-207). The difference between these two dwelling places indicates the hierarchical but also exploitative nature of caste. As the story unfolds, the distance (and difference) between the Ayemenem House and Velutha's hut reveals the impassable chasm that upper castes erect between themselves and Untouchables. The rendering of one space as touchable and the space outside the touchable domain as polluting reflects the ontological separateness of the Brahmin-Dalit binary. The spatial segregation, when governed by concepts of profane and sacred**,** becomes a crucial factor in the social production and perpetuation of identities such as Brahmin and Dalit.[102] Such a codification of space in terms of pure and impure is a feature of caste that everyone observes irrespective of one's caste status. Both the brahminic Ipe family and Velutha's 'Untouchable' father oppose Ammu and Velutha's love affair. Both households would rather lose a family member than bridge the caste-enforced border between these two households. Whereas the Ayemenem house assumes brahminic features, exuding strength, visibility, and agency, Velutha's hut symbolizes darkness, opacity, and metaphoric untouchability.[103] So when Baby Kochamma wonders about Ammu, "*How could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed? They have a particular smell, these Paravans*" (257), she is not only thinking about Velutha's body but also extending her disgust to all Paravans, Untouchables, and their locality. Through such associations, upper castes mark both Dalit bodies and their dwellings as abject, thus legitimizing the anti-Dalit practice of untouchability.

The caste-based spatial segregation also causes a psychological disconnect between touchables and untouchables. Like Baby Kochamma, when Mammachi (Ammu's mother) learns about Ammu and Velutha's transgression, she brings forth her deep-seated fears:

> She had defiled generations of breeding (The Little Blessed One, blessed personally by the Patriarch of Antioch, an Imperial Entomologist, a Rhodes Scholar from Oxford) and brought the family to its knees. For generations to come, *for ever* now, people would point at them at weddings and funerals. At baptisms and birthday parties. They'd nudge and whisper. It was all finished now. (258)

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[102] In rural areas Brahmin-Dalit segregation is stark. In urban spaces, this segregation seems to be superseded by class. See Sriti Ganguly (2018, 51-72).

[103] In a critically acclaimed *Masaan* (2016), when a Dalit boy falls in love with his upper-caste classmate, he hides his address fearing that it would reveal him to be Untouchable.

Mammachi's rage powerfully indicates the grip of caste norms on her. However, it is not only Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, and even Velutha's father who despise Ammu and Velutha's sexual transgression, Ammu and Velutha themselves think about the consequences of their transgressive act immediately after having sex, for making the "unthinkable thinkable" (256). They fear that "for each tremor of pleasure they would pay an equal measure of pain" (335). They are aware of the dangers that caste transgression entails, so "instinctively they stuck to the Small Things. […] They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future" (338). Here, we see how caste governs both those who oppose norms and those who enforce them. The psychological distance that exists between Brahmins and Dalits also dwells in Ammu and Velutha. It is Ammu, not Velutha, who first indicates her desire to touch and be touched by Velutha. His body is compared to "chocolate" (336) in the novel, which suggests that he can be consumed and (ab)used. In both the intimate sex scene in the dark and the brutal torture act in the prison, Velutha's 'untouchability' makes his body easily available for brahminic use: by turning him into a god-like figure to satisfy desire in one case, and into a *chandala,* an abject figure, to maintain the brahminic hegemony in Ayemenem in the other.

> If they hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature—had been severed long ago […].
>
> Unlike the custom of rampaging religious mobs […], that morning in the Heart of Darkness the posse of Touchable Policemen acted with economy, not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria. They didn't tear out his hair or burn him alive. They didn't hack off his genitals and stuff them in his mouth. They didn't rape him. Or behead him.
>
> After all, they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak. (309)

The physical torture of Velutha demonstrates the epistemological disconnection of upper castes from Untouchables and the failure of democratic ideals such as justice and equality.

Any attempt at linking or bridging the spatial or psychological gap between the Ayemenem house and Velutha's hut amounts to a social catastrophe. The Ayemenem river effectively marks the touchable space from its other. All brahminic crossings from 'touchable' to 'untouchable' space are made in the dark. The children's secret visits to Velutha's hut and Ammu's nocturnal, surreptitious meetings with Velutha are examples of spatial transgressions that entail fatal consequences. Among

the children, Sophie Mol dies by drowning, and Estha and Rahel are separated. In the case of adults, Ammu is banished from the Ayemenem house, and Velutha is tortured to death**.**

Anything that is perceived as anti-caste is pushed out of the brahminic Ayemenem village. All incidents of cross-caste sexual transgressions occur at the river. Although the novel mainly deals with transgressive heterosexuality (which is viewed as abject in a caste sense), it also hints at the non-normative sexualities—unnameable, unspeakable— that surface in untouchable spaces, that is to say, outside the brahminic village. It is only outside the touchable space that queerness is exercised. Estha, Rahel, and Sophie Mol transgress their gender roles by cross-dressing in Velutha's hut outside the brahminic Ayemenem village as if dark, foreign, and profane things can only occur in non-brahminic space. Estha wears a sari, puts on a red bindi and kohl, and even becomes "the draping expert" for the girls Rahel and Sophie Mole (189). In the Ayemenem house, the children display caste-appropriate behavior: reading books, flying model airplanes, watching films, speaking English, and being corrected when they break rules. On another occasion, as adults**,** Rahel and Estha spend a whole night in a village temple watching a Kathakali performance in which the man is dressed unconventionally: "He can turn effortlessly […] into the felicity of a woman washing her hair in a mountain stream. From the sensuousness of a woman with a baby at her breast into the seductive mischief of Krishna's smile. [...] He has magic in him, this man within the painted mask and swirling skirts" (230). This depiction of queerness occurs in the village temple, a sacred and thus non-human space that, unlike the Ayemenem village, allows transgression of strictly regulated gender roles. Although the depictions of queerness in the children's play outside the village and the Kathakali performance in the village temple are gender transgressive, one is assigned polluting status and the other sacred, and through both these formulations, queerness is pushed out of the human realm. In addition, not only Untouchables, but anyone who exists outside the domain of caste is considered an ambiguous, potentially polluting figure. Kari Saipu is an example. The English sahib who goes native, speaks Malayalam, and wears Mondus (52). Despite his privileged position amidst colonized people, culturally he is considered inferior. Since he lives with a young local boy, his ambiguity gains additional metaphorical layers of untouchability. His house, across the river, might have exuded more power than the Ayemenem house, but his queer sexuality and lack of caste align him with Velutha.

Like Kari Saipu's impressive bungalow that lies outside the Ayemenem village, the city as a marker of modernity surfaces as a queer space—not fully shunned, nor fully embraced. It is attractive because of its economic potential, but it is also feared because it can pollute. Upper castes negotiate crowded spaces such as the bazaar or the modern city with supreme caution. The brahminic cryptic attitude toward traditional bazaars is extended to modern cities. Whereas the

economic impact of the modern city dilutes caste to some extent, city spaces are not wholly free from caste. Unlike the Ayemenem village where one knows who is who, the city space blurs caste distinctions, but it also produces new kinds of marginalized people that cannot be easily labeled.

On their way to Kottayam city, the Ipe family sees Murlidharan, an ex-soldier, on the highway, "perched cross-legged and perfectly balanced on the milestone. His balls and penis dangled down, pointing towards the sign which said: COCHIN 23" (23). He is naked "except for the tali plastic bag that somebody had fitted onto his head" (23). Since both his hands were blown off in the Second World War, he could not remove the plastic bag from his head. Although the narrative voice here provides background information about Murlidharan, figures like him surface as the byproducts of the modern city. Only in the city, not in the village, do we see "Hollow people. Homeless. Hungry. Still touched by last year's famine" (301). However, once the Ipes enter the city, we see its appeal through its hotel, airport, train station, and cinema hall. But the city also presents its dark side in that Estha is sexually abused by the "Orangedrink Lemondrink man" (104) in the cinema hall, and the Ipes are stopped and harassed by a communist mob. Thus, the city space presents itself as both tempting and dangerous for the Ipes. Unlike in the Ayemenem village, the Ipes cannot enforce caste in the city space, which is not to say that caste does not govern city spaces. While city spaces, like all other spaces, are labeled as either sacred or profane, pure or impure, leading to segregation between upper and lower castes, the overt practice of untouchability, or anti-Dalit violence, is predominantly a feature of the village, as opposed to the city.[104]

Gandhi's and Ambedkar's approaches toward the village and the city shed light on the ontology of caste in relation to space. Gandhi imagined the village as native, organic, self-sufficient, and used it as an anti-colonial symbol. According to Gandhi, "[C]aste answered not only the religious wants of the community, but it answered too its political needs. The villagers managed their internal affairs through the caste system […]. It is not possible to deny the organizing capability of a nation that was capable of producing the caste system and its wonderful power of organization" (Gandhi 1999, vol 15: 160-161). In 1921, in the journal *Navajivan,* Gandhi wrote:

> I believe that if Hindu Society has been able to stand, it is because it is founded on the caste system … To destroy the caste system and adopt the Western European social system means that Hindus must give up the principle of hereditary occupation which is the soul of the

[104] According to Ambedkar, "The Hindu society insists on segregation of the untouchables. […] It is not a case of social separation, a mere stoppage of social intercourse for a temporary period. It is a case of territorial segregation and of a cordon sanitaire putting the impure people inside a barbed wire into a sort of cage. Every Hindu village has a ghetto. The Hindus live in the village and the untouchables live in the ghetto" (1948, 21-22).

> caste system. Hereditary principle is an eternal principle. To change it is to create disorder. (quoted in Ambedkar 1979-2003, 9: 276)

Gandhi endorsed the village model because he saw the structure of an Indian village as self-sustaining. In his utopian village,

> Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals […], sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units.
>
> Therefore, the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it **(**quoted in Parel 1997, 188-189).

As opposed to the village model, Gandhi saw the city as foreign, evil, and polluting.

However, Ambedkar, a Dalit demagogue, despised the idea of Gandhi's utopian village. Ambedkar pointed out that Gandhi's brahminic perception made Gandhi "unsee" the villages for what they were. Ambedkar described the Indian village as "a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, [and] narrow-mindedness" (Ambedkar 1979-2003, 13: 2). To Ambedkar, the Gandhian notion of the village only represented Brahminism, and it masked the discrimination suffered by Untouchables. Spurning the brahminic-centric conception of the Gandhian village, Ambedkar argued that

> the Village Republic of which the Hindus are so proud. What is the position of Untouchables in this republic? They are not merely the last but are also the least.
>
> […] In this Republic there is no place for democracy. There is no room for equality. There is no room for liberty, and there is no room for fraternity. The Indian village is a very negation of a Republic**.** The republic is an Empire of the Hindus over the Untouchables. It is a kind of colonialism of the Hindus designed to exploit the Untouchables. The Untouchables have no rights. They are there only to wait, submit, and serve. […] They have no rights because they are outside the village republic and because they are outside the so-called village republic, they are outside the Hindu fold. (Ambedkar 1979-2003, vol. 5: 25-26)

The God of Small Things complicates Gandhi's and Ambedkar's neat and contrasting positions on the village and the city. In Ayemenem, the city and the village seem to merge. Although the Ipe

family resides in the village, they consume both local and foreign goods and they have access to both national and transnational resources. So what Gandhi associates with the city also exists for the Ipes in the village. In addition, Gandhi's ideal village indeed seems like "a sink of localism" if one looks at it from a Dalit perspective. Within the same geography, the Ipe family and Velutha's family live in different temporal and material realities. Ambedkar's visceral hatred for the village and Gandhi's suspicion of the city lead them in different directions, overlooking the fact that caste permeates both these spaces. Although caste conceals itself better in the city, the city model is an extension of the village model. In both spaces only Untouchables do manual scavenging.

In the context of the novel, however, Velutha's life (and death) in the Ayemenem village effectively challenges the idea of Gandhi's utopian village. The "inner circle" (the Ipe family) crushes its "outer circumference" ('Untouchable' Velutha) when it acts in ways contrary to the expectations set by the "inner circle." While Gandhi expects the "outermost circumference" to sustain the inner circle and thus achieve its own sustenance and while he warns the "outermost circumference" not to be violent, he has no similar wisdom to offer to the "inner circle." It is the members of the inner circle—the Ipes, the village politician, and the policeman—who commit violence. However, the novel also debunks Ambedkar's extreme hope in the modern city, and thus in modern ideas and people who embody the modern value system as an antidote to caste practices because the cosmopolitan, foreign-educated Ipes eliminate Velutha for defying caste norms.

Furthermore, we see the Ayemenem village in two time periods: once in Rahel and Estha's childhood, and later when they return to Ayemenem as adults. Upon her arrival, Rahel notes that the village river has shrunk and that new houses have been built with "Gulf-money" (Roy [1997] 1998, 13). Referring to the shrinking, toxic river and reflecting on the contrast of the 'then' (pristine, organic) versus the 'now' (disfigured, corrupted) of the village, Roy points out the neocolonial tendency of Western capital to usurp resources and exploit native labor. Rahel's observation, though apt, reflects a common brahminic tendency that tends to blame neo/colonial powers for India's problems, but seems hesitant to acknowledge Brahminism as a form of colonization that leads to immense inequality. In fact, Rahel's upper-caste sensibility that focuses on the evils perpetrated by external forces obscures the reality of caste that exploits Dalits in the Ayemenem village. This brahminic tendency we glimpse in Rahel has always existed among the upper castes. Gandhi is a good case in point. Unlike the village, Gandhi sees the city as a site of toxicity and city people as "brokers and commission agents" for colonizing forces (Gandhi 1921, 288-289). In criticizing the city, Gandhi argues that upper-caste and upper-class people care only for self-aggrandizement, and that caste interests and affiliations overshadow other identity markers based on region, religion, and language. Gandhi seems to resent, as Ambedkar has always argued, the city's potential to disrupt

the brahminic status quo. Caste episteme, in its most fundamental sense, haunts Gandhi's formulation of the village and the city because he assigns the former a sacred hue, and the latter a polluting one. Gandhi's "city brokers" are not simply located in cities. Chacko's abuse of power and Velutha's custodial murder take place in the Ayemenem village. Both Gandhi and Ambedkar disregard the hold of caste over village and city spaces. The Ayemenem village illustrates its fixation with caste by marking spaces as pure and impure. The upper-caste characters, in particular, resent Ammu and Velutha's affair because both, through their sexual transgression, threaten to bridge the spatial gap that the caste system enforces between Brahmins and Dalits. As a result, they fear that the blurring of spatial segregation between touchable and untouchable spaces could lead to connections and bridges that might weaken brahminic hegemony.

3. Queering Gender and Class

One can draw parallels between class and gender issues in India and similar issues elsewhere. However, in India, the specificity of caste shapes class and gender issues differently. I next discuss how caste shapes class and gender relations by examining Roy's male and female characters in light of texts like the *Manusmriti* and the *Mahabharata.*

In *The God of Small Things*, gender inequalities are at once apparent. Even the way minor characters like the village politician Pillai and his wife Kalyani act demonstrates how gender works. Although Kalyani appears briefly, the reader immediately recognizes in her the epitome of wifehood that Manu assigns to Hindu women. She seems to willingly accept her subordination: "She referred to her husband as *addeham* which was the respectful form of 'he,' whereas he called her 'edi' which was, approximately, 'Hey, you!'" (Roy [1997] 1998, 270). Whenever Kalyani appears, she acts like an efficient but docile servant who keeps the house tidy and only speaks when spoken to—that, too, with a subdued, hesitant nod. Other female characters who appear in the novel are expected to be subservient like Kalyani. Those who deviate pay a heavy price. Non-conforming women are either banished or declared mad. Misogyny is shown not only through the central tragedy but also through family lore, photographs, and portraits. The photograph of Rahel's great-grandparents, depicting a repressed woman and a carefree man, seems to trace women's subordination backward. Even though the photograph belongs to another time and place, it contextualizes the gender relations as they manifest in the present of the text.

Referring to madness in women, Mammachi says, "it ran in their family. That it came on people suddenly and caught them unawares. There was Pathil Ammai, who at the age of sixty-five began to take her clothes off and run naked along the river, singing to the fish" (223). Mammachi seems to make sense of her daughter Ammu's desire by pathologizing it:

> [T]here was something restless and untamed about her. As though she had temporarily set aside the morality of motherhood and divorceehood. Even her walk changed from a safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk. She wore flowers in her hair and carried magic secrets in her eyes. She spoke to no one. She spent hours on the riverbank with her little plastic transistor shaped like a tangerine. She smoked cigarettes and had midnight swims. (44)

Ammu's untamed sexuality threatens Ayemenem's social order. When Ammu's family locks her up, a popular film song, describing a young girl who is forced to marry a man of her family's choice, not the one she loved, and who subsequently commits suicide, wafts through the air (see 218-219). Motifs such as folksongs contextualize Ammu's tragedy and reflect the larger socio-cultural Indian reality, which is perpetuated and upheld by caste norms, or what Smita Jassal obliquely refers to as "the dynamism and vitality of the past" (Jassal 2012, 254).[105]

Unlike all conventional, caste-based marriages, the novel presents self-chosen relationships as meaningful. However, even these self-chosen relationships flounder because dominant castes resent unions based on desire: Ammu and Velutha's affair leads to their violent deaths; Rahel and Larry's relationship fails, although others are not directly involved in its failure.

> When Larry held his wife in his arms, her cheek against his heart, he was tall enough to see the top of her head, the dark tumble of hair. When he put his finger near the corner of her mouth he could feel a tiny pulse. He loved its location. And that faint, uncertain jumping, just under her skin. He would touch it, listening with his eyes, like an expectant father feeling his unborn baby kick inside its mother's womb. (Roy [1997] 1998,18-19)

Despite Larry's love, Rahel's traumatic childhood comes to infringe upon her present and ruins her marriage. Larry, being an American and unlike the Ipe family's upper-caste men with their self-induced repressed sexualities (I will discuss this in the next section), is not limited by caste. He treats Rahel like a precious gift "[g]iven to him in love," and yet the marriage ends because "when they made love; Larry was offended by her eyes. They behaved as though they belonged to someone else" (19). So, their failed marriage has nothing to do with Larry, but instead with Rahel's

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[105] Smita Jassal (2012) examines the vast potential of folksongs and demonstrates how they "help to create and sustain communities" (254) and also occasionally are "defiant and subversive" (256). Thus, the gist of these songs puts men and women in a certain relation to each other and to their community that upholds caste order.

past which haunts her and makes her absent from the space she inhabits with Larry. Even before meeting Larry, Rahel seems to be stifled by her past. Like her mother who marries the first man she meets to escape the claustrophobic Ayemenem household, Rahel too runs away from the confining Ayemenem House and gets married with Ammu-like urgency, "drift[ing] into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge. With a Sitting Down sense" (18). Both fight the restrictive world of caste. Whereas Ammu weds a "wrong" man and Rahel the "right" man, both marriages fail because, in both cases, women defy caste norms.

Manu's laws seem to shape gender relations. Characters and situations seem to be guided by Manu's edicts which lead to Velutha's murder, the twins' separation, and Ammu's expulsion from the Ayemenem house and her subsequent death in some obscure hotel room. When Ammu is banished from the Ayemenem house, she says she is made to feel "like a road sign with birds shitting on her" (161). This utterance is made with regard to her family, but it effectively articulates the collective societal hostility toward non-conforming women. Conversely, the Ipe family has another set of rules for the men. It discriminates against Ammu, but not against her brother Chacko. Both dissolve their marriages and come to live in their parental home: Ammu starts an affair with an 'Untouchable' man, and Chacko begins sexually abusing lower-caste/class women who work for him. Despite these similarities, the son is welcomed: "[Mammachi] fed him, she sewed for him, she saw to it that there were fresh flowers in his room every day" (248). The son's sexual adventures and the daughter's desire are given radically different treatments. The Ipe family tolerates Chacko's sexual escapades, but they curb Ammu's genuine relationship with Velutha. Whereas the people in the Village show sympathy toward Ammu, they privately condemn her for leaving her husband. Ammu quickly learns "to recognize and despise the ugly face of sympathy. Old female relations with incipient beards and several wobbling chins made overnight trips to Ayemenem to commiserate with her about her divorce" (43). Nobody comes to show similar solidarity with Chacko because, unlike Ammu's situation, Chacko's is not seen as a catastrophe, nor are his choices questioned by his family or by his village community. These contradictory behaviors indicate the burden caste puts on women.

Unlike Chacko, Ammu's reasons for leaving her husband are grave, but she gets no honest support from her family. After her marriage, she sees firsthand that her husband is not only "a heavy drinker but a full-blown alcoholic with all of an alcoholic's deviousness and tragic charm" (40). Often he would beat Ammu, and to save his job, he is ready to send her to his superior Mr. Hollicks. He tells Ammu, "Viewed practically, in the long run it was a proposition that would benefit both of them […]. In fact *all* of them, if they considered the children's education" (41). That is the point when Ammu leaves him for good. Like other upper-caste men, Ammu's husband seems to take

women for granted. He agrees to send his wife to be "looked after" (42) at his boss Mr. Hollick's bunglow, as though women are goods that can be exchanged. Furthermore, whereas Ammu's parents resent Ammu's inter-religious marriage, they accept Chacko's inter-racial marriage. Unlike Chacko, when Ammu's marriage fails and she is forced to return to the Ayemenem House, she faces the veiled contempt of her family and the village. In fact, Ammu's leaving and returning to the Ayemenem house indicate the widespread misogyny embedded in the culture. By leaving her parental home, she attempts to break free from its confines, but the place she goes to, that is, her husband's house, turns out to be more toxic. Her leaving and returning indicate the control that men as fathers, husbands, sons, and brothers exercise over women. By running away from the Ayemenem house, by getting married, by dissolving the marriage, and by initiating a relationship with the Dalit man, Ammu asserts her independence, but the caste grid is so well entrenched that it smothers her to her untimely death. Through the portrayal of Ammu and even minor female characters like Kalyani, the novel links caste to gender violence.

Whereas *The God of Small Things* engages with gender and caste oppression throughout, it also hints at the complex interface of sexuality and caste in scenes where Chacko and Velutha visit Comrade Pillai and his wife Kalyani. We see Kalyani's husband, Comrade Pillai, eating a meal, with their two children and the old grandmother present in close proximity. Velutha, the 'Untouchable,' appears. Kalyani seems "sulky" (286) as she turns toward her husband after talking momentarily to Velutha at the door. Suddenly, in the midst of this mundane setting, the text tells us that Kalyani's husband wants to touch her breasts (286). It is striking how food, desire, the presence of an 'Untouchable,' and the seeming **"**sulkiness" of an otherwise subservient wife are all united in one frame. At this point, Velutha's "unthinkable" affair with the upper-caste Ammu is already known in the village. Kalyani's fleeting encounter with Velutha seems to evoke an ambiguous reaction in her as she faces her belching husband who has spindly legs and an ugly belly as opposed to Velutha's muscular "swimmer's body" (175). Her misogynistic husband may have been excited by Kalyani's intense, discomforting reaction to Velutha's presence.

However in another instance, when Chacko visits Comrade Pillai, they discuss politics, factory workers, and children's education, completely oblivious to the presence of voluptuous Kalyani in their midst—all three, though in close proximity, fail to touch one another. This frigidity between the touchables—Chacko, Comrade Pillai, and Kalyani—emerges in a complicated way when the 'Untouchable' Velutha visits Comrade Pillai's house. Unlike Chacko's visit, the visit by the 'Untouchable' man seems to touch both husband and wife sexually**.**

In the company of Chacko and her husband, Kalyani devolves into a safe mother-like figure, but she emerges as a woman in the fleeting presence of Velutha. Despite being an 'Untouchable'

and without even entering the house, Velutha seems to touch Kalyani and her husband. Pillai's reaction is most intriguing as it also takes a homoerotic edge. Even when Pillai knows that Velutha is standing at the door, he continues eating his meal of banana and yogurt and goes to meet Velutha at the door only after satisfying his appetite. Unlike Comrade Pillai and Chacko's meeting, no real communication occurs between Velutha and Comrade Pillai, and yet Velutha seems to have touched him because when Comrade Pillai comes back to the living room, the already satisfied Comrade Pillai consumes another banana, as if his hunger is stoked again by his encounter with the 'Untouchable' man. Now when Comrade Pillai has all the time to touch Kalyani, he instead thinks about Velutha's polished fingernails (288), not the false charges pressed upon him and for which Velutha came to seek his help.

Two different visitors—the touchable Chacko and the 'Untouchable' Velutha—to Comrade Pillai's house reveal a complicated social ontology of caste and sexuality. The touchable Chacko is invited into the house, and all touchable adults and touchable children share food and anecdotes, but this meeting is also underscored by strife, competitiveness, and disdain. No genuine connection occurs between Chacko and Comrade Pillai's family. Unlike the touchable Chacko, the 'Untouchable' Velutha is not let into the house—untouchability is practiced casually. No food or drinks are shared, and no child appears to recite a poem. Yet, Velutha touches both Kalyani and Comrade Pillai without really touching them. Although Velutha does not get the much-needed help from Comrade Pillai and consequently he is killed by the police, his presence casts a powerful spell over both husband and wife. Whereas the narrative's central thrust remains on Ammu and Velutha's cross-caste sexual transgression, it also touches upon themes of queerness, untouchability, and desire but it does not explore them. Roy's fiercely anti-caste novel cannot deal with all the miseries that caste unleashes on its practitioners.

The subordination of Dalits and women is exercised so casually because the *Manusmriti*—the code of conduct manual for Hindus—validates it. Guided by these principles, men subdue women and Dalits. In *The God of Small Things*, the Indian religious past and its philosophical underpinnings come to haunt the text and shape the tragedy of Ammu and Velutha's cross-caste affair. The text enumerates some key events and characters from the *Mahabharata*, which seems to resemble the novel's central plot. In Roy's novel, we hear about the high points of the epic—the story of cousins, Pandavas and Kauravas, who fight for the kingdom of Kuru. We meet Karna, a skilled warrior of unknown lineage (an outcast), who fights against Pandavas on the battlefield: "Karna the Generous. Karna the abandoned child. Karna the most revered warrior of them all" (231). Velutha seems to share many of Karna's qualities. The (upper-caste) world that surrounds Velutha and Karna appears to be the same, even though these two worlds are separated by

several centuries. One of the Pandavas makes fun of Karna and reviles him "for being a lowly charioteer's son" (233). Under the guidance of the "just" Krishna, one of the Pandava brothers kills Karna on the battlefield by stealth. Karna dies "unfairly, unarmed […]. Stoned out of his skull" (232). Velutha, too, shares Karna's fate because of his outcast status. Karna's manner of death on the battlefield resonates with the extrajudicial killing of Velutha. Like Karna who is removed by brahminic deceit, the Ayemenem village's touchable policemen and politicians and the Ipes unite to eradicate Velutha for eroding caste lines.

In the epic, Karna is actually the half-brother of Pandavas, the illegitimate son of Pandavas' mother, Kunti. She abandons Karna because he is born out of wedlock and therefore—without caste. Apparently, Kunti abandons the child because there is no father in sight, and children born out of wedlock are treated like pariahs. Ammu shares Kunti's torment to some degree. Ammu's family secretly condemn her for her divorcee status and her children for their hybrid status. "Baby Kochamma disliked the twins, for she considered them doomed, fatherless waifs. Worse still, they were Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry" (45). Ammu and Kunti's story, and Velutha and Karna's story, indicates the epistemological link between caste and gender subordination of women and Dalits.

Furthermore, in a game of dice, having lost everything, the Pandavas stake their wife, Draupadi. Having won Draupadi, the Kauravas publicly humiliate her (Vyasa [n.d.]1883-1896, vol. 2: 140-141). One of the Kaurava brothers, Dushasana, drags her by her hair into the courtroom, calls her a Shudra or slave, tries to disrobe her, the eldest brother, Duryodhana, insults her by revealing his thigh to her (Luthra 2014, 146-147), and Karna, a friend of Kauravas, calls her a prostitute because she has simultaneously married five persons (149). Ammu suffers the same kind of humiliation. Her husband thinks of her as his property that he can sell or exchange to retain his job and carry on with his drinking. Her family—and by extension the Ayemenem village—humiliates her for the choices she makes. In the epic, Draupadi is objectified by the warring men, Pandavas (her five husbands), who stake her, and the Kauravas, who win her. Several centuries later, someone like Ammu seems to be ill-treated by her husband as well as by her father and brother. Using these tropes, Roy connects her narrative to seminal texts such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Manusmiriti*, thus linking the genesis of present-day socio-cultural ills to the texts that condone caste discrimination and gender violence.

4. Queer Potentials: Men in the Ayemenem House

Queerness, both in a literal and metaphorical sense, keeps surfacing in the novel. Whereas the upper-caste men impose stringent heterosexual roles on others and on themselves to maintain caste

privilege and purity, they seemingly suffer in the process. Caste rejects non-normative sexualities and dismisses any form of heterosexuality that is not mediated via caste norms. Despite holding power over non-brahminic others and women, upper-caste men seem to denigrate themselves by repressing their (queer) sexuality. In what follows, I discuss how caste influences the lives of three upper-caste men Pappachi, Chacko, Estha, and one upper-caste woman, Baby Kochamma, all belonging to the brahminic Ipe family.

The members of the Ipe family live a privileged life by enforcing and observing caste norms. Looking at her family with adult hindsight, Rahel realizes that, despite their privilege, most members of her family are misfits, peculiar, and transgressive—features of the Ipe family that keep erupting in myriad ways in the novel. The district Food Products Organization forbids the Ipe family to make jam for commercial purposes "because according to their specifications it was neither jam nor jelly. Too thin for jelly and too thick for jam. An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency" (Roy [1997] 1998, 30). Only when Rahel muses upon her family in retrospect does she note that this ambiguous and unclassifiable thing runs deep in her family. An arbitrary government law that comes to regulate the Ipe family's business seems to mirror caste laws**.** Both seem to impose a kind of order by classifying everything into neat categories. The laws that make "jam jam" and "jelly jelly" are similar to the caste laws that make "grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles […] [brahmins brahmins and untouchables untouchables]" (31). Furthermore, despite their caste privileges**,** upper-caste characters seem to have been damaged by caste. They appear to be vague but gain coherence when one looks at their lives from a queer and caste perspective.

Pappachi's—Rahel's maternal grandfather—life is a testimony to how caste negatively shapes upper-caste men. Throughout his marriage, Pappachi acts violently toward his wife, Mammachi. Although the text offers some reasons for his inexplicable "sudden bouts of temper" (49), it does not sufficiently explain his violent behavior, which borders on the manic depressive. His wickedness becomes more pronounced with age. As a pensioner, Pappachi cannot hide behind the duties of a householder. Having nothing to do, his suppressed frustrations surface to vitiate the already fragile harmony of the Ayemenem house. The narrative tries to explain Pappachi's brutality before marking it incomprehensible and acknowledging that Pappachi's violent tendencies have always existed in him:

> He was a photogenic man, dapper and carefully groomed, with a little man's largeish head […]. His light brown eyes were polite, yet maleficent, as though he was making an effort to be civil to the photographer while plotting to murder his wife. He had a little fleshy knob on the centre of his upper lip that dropped down over his lower lip in a sort of

> effeminate pout […]. He had an elongated dimple on his chin which only served to underline the threat of a lurking manic violence. A sort of contained cruelty […].
>
> There was a watchful stillness to the photograph that lent an underlying chill to the warm room in which it hung. (51)

The description of Pappachi's photograph is striking because of its ambiguity and the contradictions it carries: his eyes polite and maleficent, his manner civil and murderous, and the atmosphere still but diabolic**.** The coming together of these extremes gives the photograph a queer edge. The so-called brahminic purity and non-brahminic impurity that the upper castes rigorously keep apart seem to merge in Pappachi. Furthermore, the queer as peculiar is subtly extended to the queer as sexual when Pappachi's "largeish head" and his potential for physical violence are contrasted with his "dimple" and "effeminate pout."

Photographs make significant gestures and hint at what is not explicitly stated in the novel. These photographs also reveal the miscellaneous aspects of caste's reach in the Ipe family such as their privilege, ambiguity, repression, and dissatisfaction. Through the use of these photographs, the text captures a past codified by caste and links that past with the present of the main plot, making the present more vivid and placing the novel within the broader socio-cultural context of caste. One such photograph that appears in the novel alludes to the early regulation of children's behavior:

> It was an old black and white picture. […] Lenin, Estha, Sophie Mol and herself, standing in the front verandah of the Ayemenem House. […] Lenin, Rahel and Estha looked like frightened animals that had been caught in the headlights of a car. Knees pressed together, smiles frozen on their faces, arms pinned to their sides, chests swivelled to face the photographs. As though standing sideways was a sin. (134-135)

Since "standing sideways" suggests queerness, chaos, and "sin," children are made to stand straight from early on, a posture that produces desirable subjects by curtailing the queer practice of "standing sideways." The photograph shows four children, only three are straightened out for the photograph, not the fourth child, Sophie Mol, who is British. Since she is an outcast, her manner of standing is not commented upon. This photograph gains an extra layer of coherence when we see how Estha and Rahel are consistently disciplined at home and at school. At home, while Baby Kochamma constantly tries to fix them, their home tutor sees Satan in their eyes. At school, Rahel is reprimanded for showing an interest in breasts and for "decorating a knob of fresh cowdung with small flowers" (16), and her brother is criticized for not participating in "*Group Activities*" (11).

This disciplining, emanating from brahminic anxiety and fear of losing caste-purity, instead of rehabilitating the siblings, harms them. As adults, Rahel becomes excessively engaged with the world, while Estha retreats from it: Rahel leaves home, marries, goes on to live and work in the United State, and comes back to Ayemenem where she confronts the village politician and also her grandaunt, Baby Kochamma, but Estha hardly leaves the house, hardly speaks, and occupies "very little space in the world" (11).

In another photograph—of Rahel's great-grandparents—we see gender, caste, and even queerness locked in one frame:

> Reverend Ipe smiled his confident-ancestor smile out across the road instead of the river.
>
> Aleyooty Ammachi looked more hesitant. As though she would have liked to turn around but couldn't. Perhaps it wasn't as easy for her to abandon the river. With her eyes she looked in the direction that her husband looked. With her heart she looked away. (30)

The man, basking in his caste and gender privilege, seems oblivious to his wife. The woman, though standing next to her husband, is elsewhere which suggests unhappiness and dissatisfaction. Her looking elsewhere can also be understood as her secret desire for "standing sideways." Despite caste's strict regulations and brahminic obsession with (caste-appropriate) straightness, the tendency to stand sideways keeps breaking out among upper-caste characters. Presenting the past as a physical object via photographs, the text displays brutal scenes from the past, thus showing the stranglehold of caste on upper-caste people. The past is produced as a physical object, showing the grip of caste on upper-caste people. And these photographs, when compared and contrasted with the leading male and female characters, give hints about the characters' motivations, compulsions, and their self-induced sexual oppression.

These various contexts surrounding the photographs give us clues to the world that shaped Pappachi and made him act violently toward his wife and daughter. Through his photograph, the narrative sheds some light on Pappachi's "black mood and sudden bouts of temper" (49), linking his anger to his frustration with the bureaucracy that, after dismissing his important research finding, credited the same to an American entomologist some years later. Subsequently, this frustration erupts in the form of violence against Mammachi. However, these reasons do not explain Pappachi's inexplicable behavior because he has shown streaks of jealousy and repressed violence early on in his married life. When Pappachi is posted in Vienna and Mammachi begins to take music lessons and displays considerable talent, he resents her success and the attention she receives

from her Austrian teacher. The text further suggests that the seventeen-year age difference between husband and wife might be the reason for his mercurial behavior**:** "[Pappachi] was an old man when his wife [Mammachi] was still in her prime" (47). But these indicators appear weak in explaining Pappachi's chronic violent conduct.

The narrative does not provide sufficient reasons for Pappachi's cruelty toward his wife. Nowhere does he show any conjugal affection toward Mammachi. He beats her and his acts of violence appear so chilling because they come from nowhere, nothing seems to trigger them. Although the text enumerates Pappachi's hateful actions toward his wife, it does not comment on his unreasonable resentments toward Mammachi. His violent acts are seemingly connected with his unresolved, repressed sexuality. Once when Pappachi beats Mammachi, their son, Chacko, threatens him not to touch Mammachi ever again. After this incident, Pappachi stops beating her, but he also stops speaking to her, and thus their decades-long marriage ends in silence. The visceral revulsion that a Brahmin has toward an Untouchable, Pappachi enacts towards his wife. Pappachi undoubtedly dominates his wife, but this dominance also destroys him internally and his self-destruction seems more severe because it is self-inflicted (see chapter V**,** section 3**).** Despite his long unhappy marriage, he remains married because societal norms demand conformity. He upholds his brahminic self over his biological self. Men and women are expected to honor marriage because it is their *dharma*—their duty in life. Therefore, questioning marriage, even when toxic, is discouraged because it weakens caste. So, despite Pappachi and Mammachi's unhappy marriage, they stay together as a respectable married couple. By circumventing the questioning of dysfunctional marriages, upper-caste characters perform marriage as a sacred duty.

But Pappachi is not the only person in the Ipe family who has a repressed queer edge to his personality. His son Chacko also has streaks of queerness in him. Chacko's quick marriage with an English waitress, Margaret, in England and his subsequent divorce appear odd. The text offers two reasons why Margaret dissolves the marriage: financial difficulties and her falling in love with another man, Joe. This transition from loving Chacko to loving Joe seems abrupt because Margaret leaves him while she is pregnant with Chacko's child, which suggests that something is wrong with their marriage. In addition, the text states that Chacko has never had a female friend, and that he marries the first woman he finds congenial. As for Margaret, it seems to be a bad decision: "Until the day she married him she never believed that she would ever consent to be his wife" (244). It is not love but escapism that makes her marry him, and her love for Chacko is "actually a tentative, timorous acceptance of herself" (245). With him she also feels "as though the world belonged to them—as though it lay before them like an opened frog on a dissecting table, begging to be examined" (245). While Margaret's relationship with Chacko is marked by ambiguity and doubt

from the start, the way the text describes her relationship with Joe leaves no room for confusion, as she finds "herself drawn towards [Joe] like a plant in a dark room towards a wedge of light" (248). Only after she divorces Chacko does her relationship with him change for the better. As a friend, he is more compatible with her than as a lover or husband. After their divorce, Margaret's life choices cohere, but not Chacko's. Whereas Margaret immediately marries Joe, Chacko remains unmarried. Because he is a scion of the Ipe family, remarriage would be an easy option for him. But he prefers to sexually abuse his underpaid women employees with the tacit support of his family.

In brahminic culture, men flaunt their masculinity and sexual escapades, which has less to do with sex and more to do with exhibiting and exerting power. In order to be taken seriously by others, Chacko takes refuge in performative heterosexuality. His family supports his pro-caste fabrications. The narrative describes Chacko as "a spoiled princeling playing *Comrade! Comrade!* An Oxford avatar of the old zamindar mentality—a landlord forcing his attentions on women who depended on him for their livelihood" (65). Chacko's family seems to celebrate Chacko's "Marxist mind and feudal libido" (168). Chacko's mother, Mammachi, understands her son's needs: "She had a separate entrance built for Chacko's room […] so that the objects of his 'Needs' wouldn't have to go traipsing *through* the house. She secretly slipped them money to keep them happy. […] The arrangement suited Mammachi, because in her mind, a fee *clarified* things. Disjuncted sex from love. Needs from Feelings" (169). Despite these overblown details of Chacko's heterosexuality, when his actions are probed, they reveal other potentialities. Chacko's promiscuous lifestyle might be connected to his experience with Margaret—his first and only female friend whom he also marries. Seen in the light of his divorce from Margaret, his flings with lower-caste/class women make sense because these relationships are not threatening. They do not pose the danger of any woman leaving him again, as Margaret did, and protect him from experiencing the humiliation of divorce initiated by a woman. Throughout he remains single. His choices indicate recognition of some deep-seated deficiency, which stops him from pursuing a genuine relationship.

Like his father, Chacko fails to love a woman, but, unlike his father, Chacko emerges as a caring friend of his ex-wife Margaret and a loving father of his daughter Sophie Mol. These differences between Chacko's and his father's attitudes toward women and children might be due to the fact that, unlike Pappachi's lifelong toxic marriage, Chacko's marriage is a short-lived affair. In addition, Margaret's attitude toward marriage is not governed by caste norms; she annuls her marriage when it becomes dysfunctional. When Chacko's daughter dies, the text gives a poignant but intriguing description of his sense of devastation: "The Loss of Sophie Mol stepped softly around the Ayemenem House like a quiet thing in socks. It hid in books and food. In Mammachi's violin case. In the scabs of the sores on Chacko's shins […]. In his slack womanish legs" (15-16).

Through an unexpected but rather striking reference to Chacko's womanly legs, the text invites us to think queerly about him. Such a description of his anatomy puts his masculinity in doubt and foregrounds his queerness. His "slack womanish legs" raise questions: Does Margaret leave Chacko for another man because of a certain physical deficiency in him? Is it this that makes Chacko indifferent to pursuing a relationship with an independent, educated woman of his class?

In addition to Chacko's womanly legs, the text yields other indications that allude to his queerness, mocking his quirks and inability to accomplish tasks. He underlines passages in classical texts that nobody in the Ipe family can decode which suggests that Chacko is unknown to his family in some respects. For no apparent reason, he would quote long passages from his books: "Everybody was so used to it that they didn't bother to nudge each other or exchange glances. Chacko had been a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford and was permitted excesses and eccentricities" (38). This tolerance, and indifference, of the Ipe family toward Chacko's excesses and eccentricities can also be read as a collective brahminic indifference and neglect toward non-normative desire by framing it as cryptic. Reading Chacko in this light not only contextualizes the sudden eruption of his inexplicable Oxford moods, it explains that his very reliance on foreign books and cross-cultural references are his ways to retain his sanity in a world constrained by caste (see chapter VI, 201). Aspects of Chacko's queerness also appear in other contexts. His mother thinks he is brilliant, but Ammu (his sister) makes fun of his unprofitable pickle-making business and of his model airplanes that never properly fly. According to Ammu, "the sad but entirely predictable fate of Chacko's airplanes was an impartial measure of his abilities" (56). What seems like a casual remark carries an undertone of critique of Chacko's masculinity or recognition of his queer sexuality. Considering the caste-specific restraints and impositions, matters of sexuality and its supposed deviations are not—cannot be—freely uttered.

Despite being a Rhodes scholar, Chacko cannot build and accomplish things. He fails in the personal and professional spheres of his life, and appears even more deficient when compared with the 'Untouchable' Velutha. Unlike Chacko, Velutha is like a magician with his hands. Even as a child "[h]e could make intricate toys—tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds; he could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts" (74). Velutha's handiness hints at his sexual potency: Velutha's "carpenter's hands"[106] not only imbue life into things, they make Ammu "live[]" and "dance[]" (337). As for Chacko, it seems that he is aware

[106] The *Kamasutra* mentions some qualities that lovers should have in order to give and receive and pleasure like the quickness of hands or others manual skills as found with carpenters or people skilled in the art of building things (Vatsyayana ([n.d.] 1925, 13-15). Velutha embodies these qualities.

of his inadequacies because after the initial shock of separation with Margaret he appears satisfied and prefers to remain single: "He spoke of her often and with a peculiar pride. As though he admired her for having divorced him. 'She traded me in for a better man,' he would say to Mammachi, and she would flinch as though he had denigrated her instead of himself" (249). Chacko's carefree remark that Margaret has traded him for a better man takes a serious edge when, a night before leaving London, he looks at his child and finds "himself searching his baby for signs of Joe. The baby clutched his index finger while he conducted his insane, broken, envious, torchlit study" (117). A casual illustration of Chacko's act gains significance because he is caught in the process of doubting his masculinity.

On another occasion, when Chacko visits the village politician's house and meets the politician's beautiful wife, Kalyani, the narrative emphasizes her desirability; and then, astonishingly, without any specific reason, tells the reader that "Chacko watched her without the faintest stirring of sexual desire" (270). Whereas Kalyani is shown as voluptuous, Chacko's absolute lack of interest in her whisper his queerness when examined in light of words such as "faintest," "sexual," "stirring," and "desire." Chacko and Pappachi hardly show desire toward women. Chacko's drifting away from Margaret and quick acceptance of divorce and Pappachi's lifelong violent behavior toward Mammachi indicate their cryptic sexualities. Whereas they appear as respectable men in public, they reveal their true selves at home: Pappachi as an abusive father and husband, and Chacko as a (pseudo) sexual predator. By presenting these upper-caste men in the unguarded sphere of domesticity, the novel alludes to their queer potentialities.

The queer dimensions which lurk underneath Pappachi's photograph and which allude to Chacko's feminine legs emerge in Estha—Pappachi's maternal grandson—and are explicitly addressed in the novel. Caste, from Pappachi and Chacko's generation to Estha's, seems to have loosened its hold, but it has not disappeared. It only adjusts itself to the post-global Indian reality and unfolds in a different way to harm Estha. Before his family, or his upper-caste community, comes to enforce caste-appropriate behavior on him, Estha abandons it by receding into himself. Suppression of desire in men like Pappachi and Chacko has repercussions for Estha: Pappachi's manic depressive tendencies, Chacko's hypocritical attitudes, and the general toxic atmosphere of the Ipe family come to lodge permanently in Estha's body. He responds to these invasions by using silence as self-defense. By not speaking, he rejects the world codified by caste.

At his father's home, after completing school, Estha stays at home and does household chores, which embarrasses his stepmother. As a grown-up, he continues to do household tasks on his return to the Ayemenem House. He walks his dog, goes for long walks, buys vegetables, and goes about life like "[a] quiet bubble floating on a sea of noise" (11). His status, even as a child, has

always been vulnerable because of his mother's caste transgressions. As he gets older, he encloses himself and resists the outer world by not engaging with it. People hardly notice him: "It usually took strangers a while to notice him even when they were in the same room with him. It took them even longer to notice that he never spoke. Some never noticed at all. Estha occupied very little space in the world" (11-12). By occupying so little space, Estha takes on the subaltern status of an outcast. Although he is upper caste, he is pushed into that inferior position because he has queered the gender lines, and has voluntarily relinquished the role of a heterosexual householder and thus his social position. Mammachi (Estha's grandmother) remembers the unseeable, untouchable Paravans of her girlhood, not knowing that one day her own grandson would be assigned a similar negative space that Brahmins enforce on Untouchables within his own family and upper-caste community. Velutha's subalternity is expressed through a receding figure who "left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors" (216). Estha comes to stand in a Velutha-like relationship to the brahminic world.

Connecting Estha with his uncle Chacko and with his grandfather Pappachi further underscores the co-working of caste and sexuality. When looking at Pappachi and Chacko's life from Estha's reduced position in the family, their self-censored sexualities begin to cohere**.** Deviating from the sexual norms would have disenfranchised them and pushed them to the negative space into which Estha is pushed as a queer person. Since the text does not explicitly address non-normative sexualities, we know nothing about Pappachi's and Chacko's sexual anxieties. Concerning Estha's queer sexuality, neither the character himself nor the novel presents any confusion. However, Estha's family takes his queerness as an affront to its order and responds to it by stripping him of his brahminic status and assigning him the marginalized position of an outcast. Unlike Pappachi and Chacko who could mask their sexualities and thus claim their stakes as upper-caste and heterosexual men, Estha, being so feminine, cannot hide behind masculinity and thus loses his position in the Ipe household.

The repression of sexuality among upper-caste male characters seems widespread in the novel. Since caste exerts pressures and bestows privileges on these men, it also creates pathologies that emerge because of sexual repression. Apart from the three men I discussed above, another minor upper-class male character, the father of Estha and Rahel, and the spurned son-in-law of the Ipe family, Ranjeet, too, has a queer streak in him. Ammu, only in retrospect, realizes that she has married "the wrong man" (38), that "the slightly feverish glitter in her bridegroom's [Ranjeet] eyes had not been love, or even excitement at the prospect of carnal bliss, but approximately eight large pegs of whisky. Straight. Neat" (39). Ammu feels puzzled by his behavior: "Long after she left him, she never stopped wondering why he lied so outrageously when he didn't need to. *Particularly*

when he didn't need to. In a conversation with friends he would talk about how much he loved smoked salmon when Ammu knew he hated it" (40). Through these startling insights, Ammu is not mourning the lack of love in her marriage, but revealing her husband's indifference toward sex and his pathological lying, thereby alluding to the unspeakable dimension of his personality. Through these male characters, Roy's narrative hints at how anti-desire aspects of caste severely limit the human potentialities of upper-caste men.

5. 'How Well You Hide': Baby Kochamma in the Ayemenem House

"Father, how can *all* things be lawful unto Him? I can understand if *some* things are lawful for Him, but–-" (Baby Kochamma, 23).

Whereas the focal point of *The God of Small Things* is Velutha and Ammu's cross-caste sexual transgression and its tragic outcome, Baby Kochamma is central to the novel's main plot. If we put the narrative voice on hold for a while and consider Kochamma as a woman and not merely as the sly great-aunt who torments Ammu and Ammu's children, she emerges as a radically different character. The narrative persuasively ascribes Baby Kochamma's lifelong spinsterhood to her unrequited love with the young priest Father Mulligan and refers to her as "the wretched Man-less woman. The sad, Father Mulligan-less Baby Kochamma" (Roy [1997] 1998,45), but Baby Kochamma's later life with her maid, Kochu Maria, belies this assumption. When living in seclusion with her maid in the Ayemenem house, she embraces everything she had renounced as a young person. Now, Baby Kochamma puts on makeup, colors her lips, and uses jewelry, even though no desirable male figure is around, and her supposedly lifelong crush Father Mulligan that the narrative frequently refers to has long been dead. All day she sits with Kochu Maria in the drawing room, and they eat nuts from the same bowl "locked together in a noisy Television silence" (28). While "Kochu Maria tossed nuts into her mouth [,] Baby Kochamma *placed* them decorously in hers" (88). Through similar nuanced gestures**,** the text not only hints at their intimacy, it portrays Baby Kochamma as feminine and Kochu Maria as masculine.

When Rahel and Estha return as adults to this utopian two-women house, Baby Kochamma feels threatened by Rahel's presence, worrying that Rahel might ask her something that Baby Kochamma has inherited by outliving all members of her generation: "She touched [the gold chain and bangles she inherited] from time to time reassuring herself that it was there and that it was hers. Like a young bride who couldn't believe her good fortune" (22). Therefore, she asks Rahel, "What are your plans? How long will you be staying? Have you decided?" (29). These random questions gather meaning in the way Rahel responds to them: "Rahel tried to say something. It came out jagged. Like a piece of tin. She walked to the window and opened it. For a breath of fresh air" (29).

Here, we see how much Baby Kochamma resents Rahel, and how acutely Rahel is aware of her resentment. On another occasion while talking to Rahel, Baby Kochamma is seen sitting at the dining table rubbing the thick, frothy bitterness out of an elderly cucumber. "With her cucumber hand she touched her new haircut. She left a riveting bitter blob of cucumber froth behind" (21). Cucumber's phallic (in)significance in the female-only house and Baby Kochamma's excessive interest in cosmetics do not make her look like "the wretched Man-less woman" mourning the death of her lifelong lover. Nor have the tragic events of the past mellowed Baby Kochamma toward Estha and Rahel. On the contrary, now, when as the sole surviving member of her generation she is not accountable to anyone and can live as she pleases in the seclusion of the Ayemenem house, she resents Estha and Rahel's unexpected return. She guards her space because now she is living her life "backwards" (22), which suggests that she is living queerly. A life she denied herself as a young person she clings to as an aging person.

Only by looking at her life from a queer perspective can one see the adjustments she makes to stay on the right side of caste. As a younger person living in the Ayemenem village codified by caste and, by implication, hetero-normativity, she must have accepted the idea of non-normative desire as polluting and thus self-censored her desire. Self-censorship and confusion regarding non-normative desire surface as a common experience in the coming-out narratives of queer people even in contemporary India (Narrain and Bhan 2005; Ranade 2005, 59-61). Conservative societies regulate sexuality in some form, but the regulation of sexuality assumes more intense forms in brahminic communities because of caste, enforcing self-censorship of desire in people. And since Baby Kochamma thinks of herself as "*Koh-i-noor*" (Roy [1997] 1998, 25) a precious diamond of the Ipe family, it is plausible that she complies with the dominant norms.

Unlike Ammu and Rahel, Baby Kochamma engages with the dominant socio-cultural norms in covert ways. She maintains her agency as an upper-caste woman by repressing her sexuality, but her lifelong abiding suppression causes her to unleash cruelty on others. Throughout, Baby Kochamma is seen deviously regulating the lives of Ammu and Ammu's children, but we hardly know her as an individual. It is primarily through Rahel's voice that we learn about Baby Kochamma's life—especially how she surfaces in Ammu and her children's lives. Rahel's narrative voice tells us about Baby Kochamma's past, a time when even Ammu, Rahel's mother, was not born. Put simply, Rahel's narration of Baby Kochamma, colored by a fixed, negative gaze, presents Baby Kochamma as a person whose sole purpose in life is to control Rahel, Estha, and Ammu. Therefore, knowing Baby Kochamma only through Rahel will be inadequate.

If we consider Baby Kochamma's life from a queer perspective and the dominant socio-cultural norms specific to her formative years, we see a Baby Kochamma who is radically

different from Rahel's portrayal of her. This approach does not absolve Baby Kochamma of her crimes, but it sheds new light on her person. Focusing on the social milieu of her childhood, we might understand Baby Kochamma better. Her formative years coincided with the heydays of the Indian freedom movement during which the upper-caste nationalists led by Gandhi were purifying Hindu culture, which meant they were enforcing heteronormativity (Vanita and Kidwai 2001). They were also making complex but pro-brahminic negotiations with socially marginal groups such as women and Dalits. However, Dalits like Ambedkar accused Gandhian reformers that they only wanted cosmetic changes, not really to abandon caste but to garner Dalit support in "the freedom movement" (Ambedkar [1936] 2014, 288-290; Roy 2014, 52-50; Prashad 1996, 553). Ambedkar's anti-caste politics is still relevant in present-day India because caste-based inequalities continue. Within the context of the novel, the Gandhian upper-caste reformers strikingly resemble upper-caste men like Chacko, the communist politician Comrade Pillai, and the police inspector Thomas Mathew who all advocate equality without giving up the practice of untouchability. Incognizant of caste norms specific to Baby Kochamma's time, it must have been difficult for her to be a nonconformist. In fact, her privileges are tied to, and embedded in, the norms that recognize heterosexuality as the only sexuality and mark non-normative sexualities as polluting, un-Indian, and even anti-Indian. She also thinks of herself as the favorite child of her father, which indicates that she is susceptible to conforming to established norms.

Looking at Baby Kochamma's younger years in the backdrop of socio-cultural modes specific to her time, her life lends itself to other interpretations. The guiding force behind her choices does not seem to be as straightforward as the text states. For example, the narrative describes her joining the church as renunciation. She becomes a renunciate, not an ascetic. In the brahminic tradition, the former completely withdraws from the world whereas the latter chooses an alternative way of living as a form of rebellion against established norms (Thapar 1978). Also, although the narrative explicitly frames her interest in religion as an extension of her interest in Father Mulligan, her excessive, performative interest in biblical matters can also be seen as an imaginative way to elicit her parents' approval to join the Church and thus create an alternative place in an otherwise heterosexual landscape. It is surprising that the Ipe family allows Baby Kochamma to join the convent because while men and women are expected to revere religion and observe religious rituals in upper-caste families, any deeper engagement leading to renunciation is opposed.[107] The narrative keeps stressing that Baby Kochamma's interest in religion is nothing more

[107] Many in India admire those who renounce the world, but they forbid their own children from becoming ascetics. As one renunciate Swami Harshananda stated: "It is a tragedy of Hindu society that so many admire and praise the monastic ideals intently, but when it comes to the question of their own children taking to this path, there is terrible opposition" (quoted in Shivaram 2017)

than her interest in Father Mulligan. When she leaves the church, the narrative voice reiterates that does so because she is hardly allowed anywhere near Father Mulligan by "Senior Sisters" (24). Such an emphatic heterosexual formulation of her actions occludes other non-normative possibilities that might govern her decisions. Arguably, by taking shelter in the nunnery, she not only escapes the predetermined fate of marriage but also imagines a lifelong proximity with other women. It could also be that the nunnery reveals itself to be different from how she might have imagined it, and therefore, she abandons it.

After Baby Kochamma's return to the Ayemenem house from the convent, the official narrative is that she goes to study in America. One can argue that she takes another flight into a land of dreams where anything is possible[108] and thus also dodges heterosexual marriage that is imposed on women. Baby Kochamma leaves the Ayemenem house as Ammu and Rahel do later, but her manner and reason for leaving, though convoluted, are non-transgressive and caste-appropriate. Like Ammu and Rahel, Baby Kochamma seeks an alternative place to be. However, her approach is not confrontational because, unlike them, she is on a quest for something that cannot be named. Instead, she inhabits a heterosexual fiction of her own (and her family's) making. By pretending that "her unconsummated love for Father Mulligan had been entirely due to *her* restraint and *her* determination to do the right thing" (Roy [1997] 1998, 45), she gives a culturally legible meaning to her lifelong single status and manages to escape marriage. When she returns from the US, she exhibits immense pleasure in gardening and raising flower beds of a great variety, but before this, she has shown a similar passion for studying religion. Later, it becomes apparent that her excessive enthusiasm toward spirituality and gardening has always been temporal. Now that she has outlived all Ipe family members of her generation, she lives the life of the flesh that she had denounced as a young person. She is no longer concerned with order and hierarchy. The carefully manicured garden has long ceased to exist, and her spiritual pretensions are replaced by American soap operas.

Only in retrospect can one see Baby Kochamma's interest in gardening as a metaphor for her obsession with caste. Her aggressive gardening style not only suggests her brahminic revulsion for non-brahminic Others but also reveals her obsession with observing and enforcing order, whether related to her garden or her family. The cultivation of a garden requires pruning, removal of weeds, and constant supervision to give a garden its desired shape. She deploys similar skills in

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108 In several coming-out narratives, middle-class Indians from the LGBT community state that while they go abroad on the pretext of education or work, their real motivation is to live freely and avoid compulsory traditional marriage. This pattern also complicates the popular notion that people who emigrate to Western countries do so only for economic reasons. Sunil Gupta, Hoshang Merchant, and Saleem Kidwai talk about their leaving India because of their sexuality (see their interviews on Project Bolo 2011-2012). Several openly gay Indian authors like Vikram Seth, Firdaus Kanga, Mrinal Suri, and Aatish Taseer live in the West for similar reasons.

maintaining caste order by using force and violence, and also by eradicating whatever threatens that order, that is to say, brahminic hegemony. As an upper-caste woman, Baby Kochamma enforces order both in her garden and her family with unflagging zeal: "Like a lion tamer she tamed twisting vines and nurtured bristling cacti. She limited bonsai plants and pampered rare orchids. She waged war on the weather. She tried to grow edelweiss and chinese guava" (26-27). She enacts a similar ruthlessness when the 'Untouchable' Velutha transgresses caste norms by loving her niece, Ammu. Suddenly Velutha becomes a weed to her that she must take out before he destroys the prestige of the Ipe family in Ayemenem: "He must go [...]. Tonight. Before it goes any further. Before we are completely ruined" (257). The precision of her words matches the rigor with which a skilled gardener scythes weeds, and the certainty with which a Brahmin chants anti-Dalit mantras.

Baby Kochamma's "war" on weeds can also be seen as self-hatred. Since she seems to have repressed her sexuality almost all her life, her frustration erupts against those who defy conventions. Ammu's and Rahel's transgressions trigger a sense of rage in her. As a queer person she cannot transgress like Ammu and Rahel because, unlike heterosexuality, homosexuality does not supposedly exist in the culture, and what does not exist cannot be transgressed. She resents the transgressive actions of others because they make her encounter her own timidity, moral depravity, and cunning. Baby Kochamma's self-hatred has broader repercussions for others: She is instrumental in causing Velutha's and Ammu's deaths and the separation of Ammu's twin children. Even on an ordinary day, her conversation "was designed to exclude Ammu and her children, to inform them of their place in the scheme of things" (329). By indulging in such tactics, she reveals her sexual jealousy and discontent. By waging war on weeds, she gives her garden the desired shape. By practicing untouchability against Velutha, she fulfills her complicated needs for order in a way that provides her an outlet to calm, and deal with, her inner demons.

Baby Kochamma's approach toward gardening also points to more personal, unarticulated aspects of her personality in light of her queer sexuality. The narrative tells us that "the flower she loved the most was the anthurium. […] She had a collection of them, the 'Rubrum,' the 'Honeymoon' and a host of Japanese varieties" (26). She loves sowing exotic varieties of plants, even though it requires immense effort. Her tropical village may not be the best location for these foreign plants but she perseveres and cultivates great varieties of flowers. Similarly, the idea of embracing non-normative sexuality (and even self-chosen, unmediated-by-caste heterosexual relationship) is incompatible with the socio-cultural geography of the Ayemenem village. With great determination and cunning, she manages to lead a peaceful and comfortable life with her female maid, but this does not change her attitude toward others. Despite her education and exposure to the outside world, her caste attitude persists. She condemns Ammu for touching

Velutha and harbors a similar aversion toward her “Half-Hindu Hybrid” (45) grandchildren, Rahel and Estha, as if avenging her self-induced lifelong sexual suppression.

The way the novel presents Baby Kochamma indicates the power of caste norms. Men and women are only seen as heterosexuals. The dominance of heterosexuality is so overpowering that Baby Kochamma is automatically assumed to be heterosexual. Her passionate love interest in Father Mulligan is a fantasy that Baby Kochamma enacts, and her family validates. While Rahel’s narrative voice insists that Father Mulligan has “young Baby Kochamma’s heart on a leash, bumping behind him, lurching over leaves and stones (24), Baby Kochamma’s “bumping heart” seems settled and happy: She enjoys putting on makeup and jewelry, eating nuts and watching soap operas, and sharing quietly her life with Kochu Maria in the Ayemenem house. The narrative does not show any coyness or rely on weak suggestions as regards cross-sex couples. Although Ammu and Velutha die for transgressing caste laws, the narrative gives a vivid, animated account of their cross-caste love affair because it involves a man and a woman. Considering the dominance of hetero-normativity over brahminic culture, it would have been impossible to deal with Baby’s Kochamma as a queer character, so she is dealt with through the erasure of her sexuality. The text refers to Ammu and Velutha’s sexual union as “unthinkable” (256) but it nevertheless happens and is spectacularly consummated. What truly remains unthinkable and unspeakable is Baby Kochamma’s relationship with Kochu Maria and the queer potentialities of the novel’s upper-caste male characters.

V

Reading the Materiality of Caste

On the surface, *The God of Small Things* (Roy [1997] 1998) is the story of transgressive love between an upper-caste woman, Ammu, and her untouchable lover, Velutha, that ends in tragedy. If for a short while, one focuses on things that appear in the novel, they not only accrue character-like attributes but also interact intensely with human characters. In a brahminic context,[109] these interactions between humans and things not only shape life generally but also strengthen caste; they assign caste-specific meaning by dividing both human and nonhuman things into binaries of pure and abject, touchable and untouchable. These negotiations and interactions create brahminic economies and epistemologies. They operate in ways so that Brahmin-Dalit identities are perpetuated, which also means that women remain in complete subjugation to men in the name of maintaining caste purity. As the story in Roy's novel unfolds, things emerge as if shaping caste and, by extension, sexuality.[110] Focusing on things such as cars, furniture, photographs, and various household objects, I will analyze their impact on characters in the novel, with a primary focus on upper-caste characters. Household things divulge the gnarled lives of the members of the brahminic Ipe family embedded in and sanctioned by Hinduism. Through **"**big things" such as hotels, highways, metropolises like Delhi, London, New York, and the "history house," Roy not only

[109] The structure that divides societies into caste-based hierarchies of high and low. It privileges brahminic interests and ignores all those who are outside of the caste system such as Dalits. Culturally, caste, even though is a Hindu practice, is in effect observed by religious communities across the Indian subcontinent

[110] Caste by its very nature is both anti-desire and anti-democratic. It is anti-desire because it expects its practitioners to embrace only heterosexual roles in strict adherence to caste norms, and anti-democratic because it sanctions inequality by dividing people into high castes and low castes.

alludes to colonialism but explicitly addresses neocolonialism that came to India in the benign form of globalization, and appears to have spread the way Christianity once spread in India—"like tea from a teabag" (Roy [1997] 1998, 33). In contrast, through small, seemingly inessential household things such as cars, photographs, window panes, curtains, scissors, cupboards, and cabinets, Roy tells an intimate story of trauma, connected with caste and its anti-desire aspects, which invites us to imagine things in active roles that enable and shape characters' actions, relations, emotions, and even moral and cultural orientations. Using Roy's novel and some features of thing theory and photography theory, I will read the materiality of caste (and sexuality) in the context of human and nonhuman interplay that occurs in the novel.

When a series of tragedies strike the brahminic Ipe family—upper-caste Ammu's relationship with the 'Untouchable' Velutha becomes public; the twins, Estha and Rahel, are separated and their cousin Sophie Mol drowns in the river and dies; and Velutha is tortured to death—the Ipe family changes forever. The narrative voice reflects that small events, which last only a few hours, can "affect the outcome of whole lifetimes" (32), and goes on to compare those few fleeting hours to "the salvaged remains of a burned house—the charred clock, the singed photograph, the scorched furniture" (32), which suggests that such remains are essential to understand and make sense of lives that are lost, and lives that ensue. The narrator theorizes on the significance of ruins and intimates they must be resurrected, examined, and preserved because they are essential to storytelling; "they become the bleached bones of a story" (33).

Roy's focus on the ruins (things) to tell her story, and her emphasis on small things, recalls Roland Barthes's and Walter Benjamin's approach toward things. Using short narrative forms Barthes enters the heart of the matter, making a seemingly mundane, unessential object luminous. His fragmentary yet complete and nuanced thought processes demand the reader's full attention. Like Barthes, Walter Benjamin also relies on "small forms" to see things in a newer light, to make significant connections between seemingly disparate things, and to predict something or comment on what has gone unnoticed. Whereas Barthes studied the material world in an intense and incisive manner,[111] Benjamin showed an unusual interest in small things such as "old toys, postage stamps, picture postcards, and such playful miniaturizations of reality as the winter world inside a glass globe that snows when it is shaken" (Gershom Scholem quoted in Sontag 1981, 123). Benjamin saw reality as a world of things and spatialized ideas: To him, "Allegories are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things" (Benjamin 2003, 182). Things give weight and extension to the world expressed in words, thus making abstractions concrete and comprehensible. Commenting

[111] In *Mythologies* (1972) Barthes has shown a fascination for small things (written in short pieces) such as soap-powders and detergents, toys, plastic, steak and chips, milk and wine, and ornamental cookery.

on *Madame Bovary,* Naipaul and Flannery O'Connor point out Flaubert's unexpected but magical use of things such as "wooden shoes" and "list slippers." If by using list slippers Flaubert makes Madame Bovary's village "believable" (O' Connor 1984, 70), by referring to a country boy's wooden shoes, he gives her village "a pre-industrial edge" (Naipaul 2007, 132). Giving a concrete form to the world via material objects and things was most decidedly known in ancient brahminic culture. The possession and pursuit of things or *artha* are central to Hindu dharma, and various texts such as *Brahmanas* and *Manusmriti* regard artha highly. Although Roy is not a brahminic writer, nor a theorist or a writer like Flaubert and O'Connor in her style or politics, her novel, tangentially**,** reflects the Benjamian and Barthian approaches as she goes on to make fluent use of things and imbues them with affective meaning to tell the story of "small things." However, the spectrum of small things in Roy's novel is broad. It includes not only Ammu and her children, Velutha and his kind, but also things that act and shape the lives of her characters.

Showing a great narrative sophistication, Roy takes the reader, at the very outset, from unmarked natural surroundings to the Ayemenem village and its brahminic order. The novel's opening paragraphs describe the seamless interconnectedness of animate things, inanimate things, and those in-between, giving the scene fluidity and life. Before Rahel and the Ayemenem house appear, the narrative begins with the description of a natural landscape that gradually leads to the description of the built-up environment of the Ayemenem Village:

> May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun. (Roy [1997] 1998, 1)

The thrust of these lines presents a kind of ballet that is taking place in nature without any external (human) intervention. However, the paragraph that follows the quotation moves from the description of a river, trees, and "fruity air" to window panes, electric poles, laterite banks, roads, highways, and bazaars, stressing alliances between animate and inanimate things—such as "pepper vines snaking up electric poles":

> But by early June the south-west monsoon breaks and […] Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn mossgreen. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads.

> Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways..
>
> It was raining when Rahel came back to Ayemenem. […] The old house on the hill wore its steep, gabled roof pulled over its ears like a low hat. The walls, streaked with moss, had grown soft, and bulged a little with dampness that seeped up from the ground. The wild, overgrown garden was full of the whisper and scurry of small lives. In the undergrowth a rat snake rubbed itself against a glistening stone. (1-2)

After making a graded transition from nature to a half-built environment, Roy presents Rahel. The nature described before not only recedes but suddenly becomes secondary as the human arrives on the scene. Now the reader looks at Rahel and her family house (the Ayemenem house). The lush surroundings previously described in the text assume a different hue. The appearance of Rahel and the Ayemenem house alters radically a non-space into something tangible which orients and ushers the reader into a brahminic village—into the story. Both the house and Rahel inform each other.

The Ayemenem house not only evokes memories of the past in Rahel, but it also projects what is embedded in it. Like human biographies, things too have their histories that Igor Kopytoff has termed "biographies of things" (1986, 66). Things, according to Kopystoff, have a life history that involves various stages and careers, which are determined by economic, cultural, *emotional*, *and bodily* factors (66-68, emphasis added). The Ayemenem house's "biography" evokes both fond and traumatic memories in Rahel. As a child**,** she had played in the Ayemenem house with her brother Estha and British cousin Sophie Mol, and it was the same house from which Estha and her mother, Ammu, were banished. Coming back to it after twenty-three years was like meeting a close relation, both liked and dreaded. Whereas she looks forward to meeting Estha, she loathes her grandaunt, Baby Kochamma, who lives with her servant, Kochu Maria, in the Ayemenem house. Simply put, Rahel's ancestral home relays its (traumatic) history through its very materiality. The once concrete Ayemenem house has now "grown soft, and its walls have bulged. Swollen cupboards creaked. Locked windows burst open. Books got soft and wavy between their covers. Strange insects appeared like ideas in the evenings and burned themselves on Baby Kochamma's dim 40-watt bulbs" (Roy [1997]1998, 9-10). The Ayemenem house tells its story through its out-of-place body, its locked doors, its bare and unfurnished windows, its bulging walls. Its deserted look gives the house a haunted quality. The Ipe family's forlorn-looking car is still parked outside, matching the overall dilapidated look of the Ayemenem house. However, the Ayemenem house must not be confused with the Ayemenem house as a brahminic home. As a private home and as a brahminic home it tells two different stories (although these distinctions ultimately converge in the

story). Only as a brahminic house does it relay caste. Its concrete structure serves as a means to maintain caste borders and caste purity of the Ipes by keeping the invasive forces effectively out. The Ayemenem house's walls and its closed doors and closed windows not only shut out the dust, but they forbid Untouchables from entering. This brahminic preoccupation with notions of caste purity and pollution seems absurd because the house is built by Dalit labor. What the Ayemenem house seems to distance itself from—dust, dirt, Dalit touch—is entwined in the vitals of its body. The Ayemenem house's closeness echoes the closeness of the Indian caste system; its defensiveness suggests Brahmins' complicated relationship with ideas of pollution, purity, and untouchability. Through the narrative's iterative force, the Ayemenem house represents not only Brahminism but its swollen walls and unkempt furniture with grime on its surfaces and in crevices augment its desolation as if it were paying a kind of karmic retribution for subjecting others to similar degradation in constructing itself. Velutha's "swollen face," "smashed, upside-down smile," and "bloodshot eye" (32) that follow the violent beating he receives in prison a cell seemingly come to haunt the Ayemenem house. Instead of getting damaged or defiled by the outside, the Ayemenem house shatters itself from within:

> Filth had laid siege to the Ayemenem house like a medieval army advancing on an enemy castle. It clotted every crevice and clung to the windowpanes.
>
> Midges whizzed in teapots. Dead insects lay in empty vases.
>
> The floor was sticky. White walls had turned an uneven grey. Brass hinges and doorhandles were dull and greasy to the touch. Infrequently used plug points were clogged with grime. Lightbulbs had a film of oil on them. The only things that shone were the giant cockroaches that scurried around like varnished gofers on a film set. (88)

It is the abstract idea of caste-purity and family honor that destroys the Ipe family. First, they shut Ammu into her room; separate the twins, Estha and Rahel; and then abandon Ammu to die in an obscure hotel room. Ammu invites such a terrible fate because she has transgressed caste norms on which brahminic privilege is hinged. Caste only works when men and women marry according to caste norms; only then can the binary of Brahmin and Dalit materialize. Since observance and implementation of caste norms permit material privileges, upper castes never let caste go, even though caste's anti-desire dimensions hollow them out psychologically. By stressing the Ayemenem house's clotted-with-filth, dilapidated, and grim look, the narrative alludes to the secretively violent lives of the Ipe family's members. The narrator cautions the reader that the Ipes would suffer: "They would all learn more about punishments soon" (115). Elaborating on the nature of the

punishments, the narrator says some punishments would be big "like cupboards with built-in bedrooms. You could spend your whole life in them, wandering through dark shelving" (115). Whereas the Ipes can hide behind their privilege, the hiding itself becomes a source of debasement and distress. After forsaking Ammu and separating the twins, the lively Ayemenem house with its manicured garden declines and attains a haunted aspect.

After twenty-three years, when Rahel returns to the Ayemenem house, the first thing she notices is the dismal-looking car, both embodying the past and exposing the decline of the Ayemenem house in the present of Rahel's return. Once the car added to the Ipe family's prestige in the village, but now both the Ayemenem house and the car have lost their sheen. Whereas the members of the Ayemenem house have either scattered or died, the old car is settling more firmly into the ground with every monsoon: "Like an angular, arthritic hen settling stiffly on her clutch of eggs. With no intention of ever getting up. Grass grew around its flat tyres. The Paradise Pickles & Preserves signboard rotted and fell inwards like a collapsed crown" (295). The car, once gliding through the countryside and urban spaces, now stands stationary and dysfunctional as if mirroring the lives of its owners and offering clues to its own (historical) significance. The Ayemenem house, its unkempt garden, the car, and Rahel are in an intense subterraneous interaction. Whereas life materializes via these human and nonhuman interactions, they escape attention in everyday life.

Citing language as an example, Algirdas J. Greimas (1987) elaborates on the important role that actants play in the construction of a sentence. In the "little drama" of the sentence, according to Greimas, "actants are beings or things that participate in the action" (quoted in Tischleder 2014, 29); they give meaning to the sentence, and in doing so they show their agency "in terms of networks, scattered competencies and performances" (30). Seeing interactions between humans and inanimate objects in actantial terms gives way to the idea of "nonhuman agency" (30). In *The Human Condition* ([1958] 1998), Hannah Arendt stresses that in any given situation human actors are profoundly dependent on nonhuman actors. And that human societies are collectives, but unlike society, the collective is comprised of human and nonhuman entities, and it stresses the significance of both humans and nonhuman objects. Arendt demonstrates how the supposedly autonomous human agency is deeply invested in its material setting, and cannot perform or apply agency without the support and presence of such a setting. Rather than the control of the human over the nonhuman, she emphasizes their "relationality." Like Arendt, Judith Butler emphasizes the notion of relationality and applies it to a wide range of contexts. She observes that "despite [human body's] clear boundaries, [it] is defined by the relations that make its own life and action possible" (Butler 2015b, 130). We cannot understand bodily vulnerability outside of this conception of its constitutive relations to other humans, living processes, and inorganic conditions and vehicles for the living.

Using Arendt and Butler's insights, Karen Barad (1999, 1-11) comes up with the concept of "agential realism," and foregrounds that intra-action between/across material objects, locations, and the human cause agency. She underscores how this agency, therefore, is not an immanent feature of the human/body but an emergent condition that depends on the immediate settings. Drawing upon these ideas of relationality, in what follows, I will explore how things and objects act, exert, and apply their agency in brahminic contexts**.**

1. Car, Model Airplanes, Satellite TV, and Transistor Radio

Not only the mansion-like Ayemenem house and its furniture but also the Ipe family's Plymouth car plays a pivotal role. The events that take place in the car encourage the reader to see how human and non-human entities act upon each other, and how they resist a clear-cut distinction. Chacko (with Ammu and her children, children's grand aunt, Baby Kochamma) goes to the Cochin airport to pick up his British ex-wife, Margaret, and their daughter, Sophie Mol. The car not only takes the Ipe family to Cochin but also becomes their world until their journey ends, keeping them sheltered, comfortable, oriented, and connected like a home space does.

Throughout the text, the car, like a human, becomes different things at different places. It illustrates what Jane Bennett calls the object's "vital materiality"—object's own unique capacities. Bennett suggests that objects have their own "trajectories, propensities, and tendencies" (2010, viii). They bring attention to themselves when they stop functioning in expected ways. In doing so objects reveal their own "tendencies." In Roy's novel, the narrator mentions another car and another car ride, in another time, in which the car—carrying Ammu pregnant with Estha and Rahel—comes to a sudden halt, as if asserting itself and revealing its unexpected tendency: "The car in which Baba, [Estha and Rahel's] father, was taking Ammu, their mother, to hospital in Shillong to have them, broke down on the winding tea estate road in Assam. They abandoned the car and flagged down a crowded State Transport bus" (Roy [1997] 1998, 3). The car's abrupt halt at a critical point jeopardizes three lives, but the state transport bus appears to save those lives, emerging as what Bill Brown has referred to as a "democratic object" (2003, 43).[112] On seeing Ammu's condition, some passengers vacate their seats for her. The narrator explains passengers' behavior in class and ethical terms, but it can also be read in caste terms. It can be argued that the Brahmin-Dalit power dynamics continue to operate in the bus, albeit in different forms**.**

[112] When buses and trains were first introduced in India, it was for the first time that people sat next to each other irrespective of caste considerations. These new developments thawed the grip of untouchability to some extent.

Unlike the state-owned automobiles that usher a kind of equality between people, the use and ownership of the sky blue plymouth car by the Ipe family symbolizes their privilege and mobility. Not only does the car bring into sharp focus their superior status in the Ayemenem village; it connects the Ipes to hotels, cinema halls, highways, and airports. The members of the Ipe family go to study and work on different continents. The built environment aids brahminic mobility both in a sociological and in a bodily sense. Unlike Dalits, only brahminic castes, like the Ipe family, seem to have unrestricted rights to appear in both village and city spaces. Dalit mobility and Dalit demography, on the other hand, are fiercely regulated.[113] Reflecting on the politics of appearance in public spaces, Judith Butler demonstrates that public spaces are designed in ways that make them accessible only to a select few. Butler argues that human action is always supported, and that one's "capacity to move depends upon instruments and surfaces that make movement possible, and that bodily movement is supported and facilitated by nonhuman objects and their particular capacity for agency" (2015b, 72). In the context of the Ayemenem village, the text clearly shows those who have access to public spaces and those whose movements are regulated. The location, and general impoverishment, of Velutha's family hut outside the brahminic Ayemenem village impede their movement, curtailing Dalit rights to public spaces, which then leads to inequalities between upper-caste people and Dalits. Opposed to the grand, brahminic Ayemenem house, Velutha's hut is empty—it has four corners: "One corner for cooking, one for clothes, one for bedding rolls, one for dying in" (Roy [1997] 1998, 206-207). Things—such as cars and other household objects—not only strengthen but constitute brahminic and Dalit hierarchies in the Ayemenem village.

The sky-blue Plymouth emerges almost as something like a round character in the novel. It reveals its different aspects depending upon time and space. Its ownership by the Ipe family indicates caste-based inequalities between upper castes and Dalits in the Ayemenem village. Despite doing the backbreaking work and carrying the burden of untouchability, Velutha, Velutha's brother, Kuttapen, and Velutha's father, Vellya Paapen, live in poor conditions. Unlike the upper-caste Baby Kochamma, who not only owns furniture, house, jewelry, cosmetics, but also has access to imported insulin to keep her diabetes under control, the paralyzed Kuttapen and the old Vellya Paapen have no access to medical help in any form. Furthermore, Roy links local caste violence to global systems of violence and war when the Ipes' car "sped past young rice-fields and old rubber trees, on

[113] Gautam Bhan (2017) writes about how Dalits or the urban poor are displaced from prime city areas, particularly when real estate prices rise or the city administrations need to use the area for other urgent purposes. Government bodies do not regard them as citizens but as "encroachers" (466). In discourse, the impoverished, mainly non-brahminic others, are described as unscrupulous intruders, and their erasure is perceived as "an act of good governance,' of order, and of public interest" (Bhan 2016, 23). This anti-nonbrahminic language is strikingly similar to Narayan's character Krishna discussed in chapter III.

its way to Cochin" (35). The narrator remarks, "Further east, in a small country with a similar landscape (jungles, rivers, rice-fields, communists), enough bombs were being dropped to cover all of it in six inches of steel" (35). However, wars in other places seem to have little bearing on the privileged lives of the Ipes. Wars indirectly create beneficial situations for the local elite in that displaced populations are a source of cheap labor. Unaffected, the Ipes travel "without fear or foreboding" (35) in their car. On the highway, the Ipes' see Murlidharan, a freedom fighter gone mad, and abandoned**.** Except for the children, the Ipes hardly notice him. He is merely a part of the landscape in which "[a] carbreeze blew. Greentrees and telephone poles flew past the windows. Still birds slid by on moving wires, like unclaimed baggage at the airport" (87). Simply put, Murlidharan does not seem to matter to anybody; he seems to have descended into a non-human world and devolved into an outcast: "Murlidharan had no home, no doors to lock, but he had his old keys tied carefully around his waist. In a shining bunch. His mind was full of cupboards, cluttered with secret pleasures" (63). The description of his living space reminds the reader of Velutha's impoverished hut. Unlike the Ipes, Murlidharan's and Velutha's dwelling places have no real or imaginary doors to lock, no cupboards to store or to hide things, which make their dwelling places not only transparent but extremely vulnerable to intrusion, exploitation, and consumption.

As the Ipe family's car enters the city space, the city seems to impose other meanings on it. Whereas in the Ayemenem village the car's (and its owners') status is clearly marked, it loses that distinction in the city. The marching communist crowd directs its hostility toward the car because the car divulges its owners' class and caste status. The Ipe family's sudden encounter with the angry mob elicits a fearful reaction in them. With regard to both the car and the Ipes, the city's unpredictability replaces the village's comforting, caste-induced familiarity:

> Baby Kochamma's fear lay rolled up on the car floor like a damp, clammy cheroot. This was just the beginning of it. The fear that over the years would grow to consume her. That would make her lock her doors and windows. That would give her two hairlines and both her mouths. Hers, too, was an ancient, age-old fear. The fear of being dispossessed. (70)

Through this fear of being dispossessed, we get a glimpse of that which assails Baby Kochamma with greater intensity in her later life. When Rahel and Estha visit the Ayemenem house as adults, her fear is at its zenith. Rahel sees all of her dead grandmother's jewelry on Baby Kochamma such as rings, diamond earrings, gold bangles, and "a beautifully crafted flat gold chain that she touched from time to time reassuring herself that it was there and that it was hers" (22). Now that all

members of her family are gone or dead, Baby Kochamma takes refuge in things. As a young woman she had renounced the material world, but she embraces it in her old age: “She hugged it and it hugged her back” (22). Material possession comes to substitute for human relations**.** Things exert their agency on her with full force. They entertain and keep her occupied, making her abandon her earlier obsessions with religion, gardening, and her love for the Irish priest. They animate her in new ways that we see in her insatiable love for satellite TV. In the Ayemenem house, “where once the loudest sound had been a musical bus horn, now whole wars, famines, picturesque massacres and Bill Clinton could be summoned up like servants” (27). Curiously, the profusion of things makes not only her life but also her servant Kochu Maria’s life comfortable and easy. Now they both sit in front of the TV and eat nuts from the same bowl, giving the impression of their being friends under the TV-enforced democracy, which shows how radically things can alter human lives and relationships**.** The change that the reader sees in Baby Kochamma’s life echoes Paul Valery’s words that point up the significance of things and their agency in transforming human life:

> Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign. (Valery 1964, 225)

As these conceptions materialize and enter Baby Kochamma’s drawing room in the form of the satellite TV, she falls in love with life again and begins to cherish with vigor the Ayemenem house and its furniture that “she had inherited by outliving everybody else. Mammachi’s violin and violin stand, the Ooty cupboards, the plastic basket chairs, the Delhi beds, the dressing table from Vienna with cracked ivory knobs. The rosewood dining table that Velutha made” (Roy [1997] 1998, 28). Baby Kochamma’s fascination with and dependence on material things not only cause her to fear Estha and Rahel, her possession of “the rosewood dining table that Velutha made” complicates her brahminic privilege, it brings to the fore the question of Dalit labor and caste inequality that makes Dalits live impoverished lives and die young so that Brahmins can live forever**.** Baby Kochamma knows that her well-being is aided by things, so she fiercely clings to them. When faced with a protesting mob in the sky-blue Plymouth car on the street in Cochin, or with Rahel and Estha’s unexpected visit to the Ayemenem house, she fears losing things. However, Baby Kochamma’s fear is not only hers, but it permeates the entire Ayemenem village. It is reflected in the behavior of upper-caste men such as “Cardamom Kings, Coffee Counts, and Rubber Barons—old boarding school buddies” (69) who sip chilled beer at the Ayemenem Sailing Club, and remind each other

that they deserve their wealth, and snigger at any movement—democratic or Marxist—that even remotely question their privilege**.** This collective brahminic fear surfaces most intensely on the street in Cochin when the car and its owners invite negative attention from the city's impoverished: "Suddenly the skyblue Plymouth looked absurdly opulent on the narrow, pitted road. Like a wide lady squeezing down a narrow corridor. Like Baby Kochamma in church, on her way to the bread and wine" (65). The narrative voice offers another description that illustrates the seething anger that the poor hold against the privileged. When the Ipes encounter a communist mob in the city, the Plymouth begins to look like "an angular blue animal in a zoo asking to be fed" (70). It is not only the Brahmin-Dalit hierarchy that is problematic here but how this hierarchical difference stands in relation to things and their ownership. Brahminic privilege, and Dalit impoverishment, is constituted via brahminic considerable control over things (Manu [n.d.] 1991, 10: 124, 125; Singh 1990a, n.p.). Once upper castes establish control over things, they assign some things sacred and touchable status, and define others as abject and untouchable**.**

Unlike the village where the access to material things and modes of life between upper castes and lower castes are unambiguous, the city queers such neat demarcations by its modes of production and distribution. Therefore, compared to those living in a village, people in the city respond differently to caste hierarchies. In two instances, the city dilutes the brahminic hegemony. First, when the angry-looking marching men suddenly appear on the street with their "handkerchiefs or printed Bombay Dyeing hand towels on their heads to stave off the sun [...] like extras who had wandered off the sets of the Malayalam version of *Sinbad: The Last Voyage"* (Roy [1997] 1998, 80). This image suggests the potential danger that the car and its owners elicit in a city space. Second, unlike the Ayemenem village, the city emerges as an unpredictable and hostile space. In the cinema hall, when Estha hums a song, he is bluntly asked to behave: "Heads twisted around like bottle caps. Black-haired backs of heads became faces with mouths and mustaches. Hissing mouths with teeth like sharks. Many of them. Like stickers on a card" (100). Since Estha continues singing, Ammu asks him to go into the lobby where "the Orangedrink Lemondrink man" (102) sexually abuses him. After molesting Estha, he fakes exaggerated respect toward Estha's family. The abusive behavior toward the car (a brahminic possession) and Estha (a brahminic body) articulates dormant anger that the lower castes harbor against the brahminic castes.

Despite its immense usefulness, the car imposes certain restrictions on the Ipe family members. Their car journey to Cochin is momentous because it is the only time the reader sees them together and up close. They sit in close proximity and, within a short journey, we see the layered power dynamics that occur between adults, and adults and children. When someone from the marching crowd roughs up the car, Ammu mocks Chacko, "How could he *possibly* know that in this

old car there beats a truly Marxist heart?" (70) In spite, Chacko asks Ammu, "[I]s it at all possible for you to prevent your washed-up cynicism from completely colouring everything?" (70) His insensitive remark imposes a galling quiet: "Silence filled the car like a saturated sponge. *Washed-up* cut like a knife through a soft thing. The sun shone with a shuddering sigh. This was the trouble with families. Like invidious doctors, they knew just where it hurt" (70). Neither Chacko nor Ammu can avoid the unpleasant situation; they have to remain seated and tolerate each other inside the car. In a convoluted way, like caste, the car, despite being an object, and until the journey ends, restricts and regulates the Ipe family members' movements and sitting postures, and any disregard of the car's impositions threatens a serious accident. Later, upon seeing Velutha in the marching crowd, Rahel stands up and shouts, "Velutha! *Ividay!* Velutha!" (71) and she looks as if she "ha[s] grown out of the Plymouth window like the loose, flailing horn of a car-shaped herbivore" (71). With a violent immediacy, Ammu and Baby Kochamma bring Rahel back to her proper sitting posture, stunning the girl with their intense disapproval. Flirting with or criss-crossing the car's impositions makes the human body as vulnerable as a transgressive body is in a brahminic community**.** Ammu invites death by having an affair with an 'Untouchable' man.

However, the car is not the only thing that manifests the Ipe family's brahminic privilege. Every year Chacko orders model airplanes, a luxury item totally out of place in the Ayemenem village. Chacko's approach to model airplanes offers clues to his personality; it also reveals his attitude toward other human beings. Since Chacko's imported airplane models frequently crash (his room is cluttered with the crashed remains of airplane models: "A tail, a tank, a wing. A wounded machine" (56), his sister Ammu, remarks that "the sad but entirely predictable fate of Chacko's airplanes was an impartial measure of his abilities" (56). Despite his Oxford education and caste privilege, he courts failure in engaging with both things and people. In addition to crashing airplane models, he runs an unsuccessful pickle factory, and his marriage with Margaret ends in divorce. Chacko's failures seem bigger when one compares him with the 'Untouchable' Velutha who, unlike Chacko, not only establishes an intensely honest relationship with the upper-caste Ammu, but also imbues life into dead things with his skill, artistry, and balance. Even as a child "[Velutha] could make intricate toys—tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds; he could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts [and as an adult man he can love a woman—truly and passionately]" (74). The touchable Chacko destroys whatever he touches; the 'Untouchable' Velutha instills life into things through his touch.

Such alarming differences signal other differences between Chacko and Velutha. Throughout the text, in initiating development projects, Chacko experiments with expensive and imported things leaving behind mounds of waste material. Unlike Velutha, Chacko seems to

dominate things and posits himself as superior in dealing with nonhuman and human actors. He takes over Mammachi's successful pickle-making business and turns it into an unsuccessful one, and he treats women working under him like things that can be consumed. In contrast, Velutha engages with things like a musician engages with his instruments and accompanists to create tuneful music, which can only happen if each participating entity is in sync with one another. Unlike Chacko, Velutha practices relationality, which Roy stresses throughout:

> As he rose from the dark river and walked up to the stone steps, she saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. He moved so easily through it. As she watched him she understood the quality of his beauty. How his labour had shaped him. How the wood he fashioned had fashioned him. Each plank he planed, each nail he drove, each thing he made had moulded him. Had left its stamp on him. Had given him his strength, his supple grace. (333-334)

Velutha presents a striking instance of the permeability of human bodies and their entanglement with matter. While Velutha's crafts from material things bear his distinctive imprint, the natural environment leaves its (reciprocal) mark on him. He seamlessly blends into his surroundings. In doing so, the material environment touches him back; "each thing he made had moulded him." Through Velutha's portrayal, the narrative emphasizes the conception of intersubjectivity between human and nonhuman actors. In addition, the text stresses not only Velutha's skills in creating new things but also his ability to repair and maintain what already exists. The river's devastation dramatizes the environment's marginal status in the name of development, turning the already marginalized into eco-refugees and social outcasts. Unlike the brahminic Ayemenem house, and several concrete houses that cropped up at the banks of the already drying and toxic Menanchal river in India's post-liberalization phase, Velutha's impoverished dwelling place is in harmony with the Ayemenem ecosystem when seen in the context of environmental sustainability: "The low walls of [his] hut were the same colour as the earth they stood on, and seemed to have germinated from a house-seed planted in the ground, from which right-angled ribs of earth had risen and enclosed space" (205). Like Velutha himself, his hut sustains and is sustained by the natural world.

As mentioned earlier, unlike Velutha, Chacko dominates "humans and things" which, by default, reveals the workings of gender dynamics in the Ayemenem village: "Until Chacko arrived in Ayemenem, Mammachi's factory [Chacko's mother's] had no name. Everybody referred to her pickles and jams as Sosha's Tender Mango, Sosha's Banana Jam. Sosha was Mammachi's first

name. Soshamma" (57-58). Mammachi hardly corrects or opposes Chacko's claims. She tolerates and even supports Chacko's more serious flaws. She rationalizes Chacko's sexual abuse of his women employees as his "Man's Needs" (168), but she disregards Ammu's woman's needs. Mammachi's discriminatory attitude toward Ammu reflects how gender works against women.

In such a misogynistic setting, when the upper-caste Ipe family opposes Ammu's transgressive relationship with the 'Untouchable' Velutha, things such as Ammu's transistor radio come to aid her. It grips her completely, taking on the roles of friend and consoler. As a friend it makes Ammu chase her desire. As a consoler it tells her the futility of such a chase as it involves fighting caste norms. When she hears a song emanating from the transistor radio, wafting through the air, she feels compelled to run to the river to meet her 'Untouchable' lover. The evocative lyrics (reaching her via the radio) give her a provocative edge, making her "set aside the morality of motherhood and divorceehood. Even her walk changed from safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk. […] She smoked cigarettes and had midnight swims" (44). Later, when her transgressive love becomes public and she is locked in her room by her family, the same transistor radio, now playing a sad song, makes her doubly forlorn, her own family preventing her from pursuing desire (see 218-219).

The Ipe family's obsessive control over Ammu's movements shows the link between caste and Ammu's body and her desire. They see her less as a human being and more as an emblem on which caste norms can be inscribed. The *Manusmriti* includes women as one of the things that a man must possess. The notion of woman as object dominates the *Mahabharata.* When, in a game of dice, the Pandavas lost everything to the Kauravas and had nothing left to wager, the Pandavas stake their wife, Draupadi. Having won Draupadi, the Kauravas publicly humiliate her. Even in the Vedic age,[114] women are considered as possessions or property, which, in a contemporary context, seems like a form of patriarchy, but underneath this form caste is at work.

In The God of Small Things Ammu is compared to things. At times, she is described as if she were a fine thing. She has "a delicate, chiselled face, black eyebrows angled like a soaring seagull's wings, a small straight nose and luminous nutbrown skin. […] Her shoulders in her sleeveless sari blouse shone as though they had been polished with a high-wax shoulder polish" (Roy [1997] 1998, 45). Such a description of Ammu's body echoes attributes one associates with exquisite porcelain, antique furniture, or vintage cars. Ammu's body is also compared (and contrasted) with Rahel's. Unlike Ammu, Rahel "was longer, harder, flatter, more angular than

[114] Romila Thapar writes that historians regard the Vedic age as the age when the *Vedas* were composed and recorded. The generally accepted time bracket ranges from about 1500 BC to 600 BC. While the *Rig Veda* was composed in the period from 1500 BC to 1000 BC, the other three *Vedas*—the *Sama*, *Yajur*, and *Atharva*—date to the period after 1000 BC (2014, viii).

Ammu had been" (92). The text describes Ammu and Rahel's physical attributes such as their "angularity" in ways as if they are not women but cars—adjectives attributed to them and cars are strikingly similar. However, later in the story, the description of both the car and Ammu's body takes on a macabre hue. Just as the sky blue Plymouth loses its functionality, the whole of Ammu's beautiful body becomes ash, "crammed into a little clay pot. Receipt No. Q498673" (163). One can read these comparisons between women's bodies and things in two ways. When the narrative voice compares Ammu's body to exquisite porcelain, it reveals how the brahminic culture assigns women an object-like status. However, when it refers to Ammu's ashes, it brings into sharp focus the materiality of the human body, irrespective of the body's gender. In the novel, humans take on features of things, and things take on human aspects. After giving birth to her twins, Ammu "count[s] four eyes, four ears, two mouths, two noses, twenty fingers and twenty perfect toe-nails" (41) as if to make sure that nothing is missing from a precious parcel.

2. Photographs

Just like the sky blue Plymouth car, photographs emerge to divulge the nature of the brahminic Ipe family. Their Photographs frame the world as upper caste. Dalits, who are everywhere, never appear in these photographs, and by this omission, the Ipes make the present and the past conclusively theirs, that is, brahminic. Despite revealing brahminic privilege and Dalit erasure, these photographs inadvertently reveal the power dynamics at play between men and women and adults and children within the Ipe household. Unlike men who look demanding and even cruel in the photographs, children and women seem scared and constrained. In one photograph, the reader sees the Ipe children "look[ing] like frightened animals that had been caught in the headlights of a car. Knees pressed together, smiles frozen on their faces, arms pinned to their sides, chests swiveled to face the photographs" (Roy [1997] 1998, 134-135). In another photograph, the reader sees Rahel's great-grandparents: Reverend Ipe and his wife, Aleyooty Ammachi. The photograph not only captures their faces, it relays a running commentary on gender, caste, and even queerness—all locked in one frame:

> Reverend Ipe [Rahel's grandfather] smiled his confident-ancestor smile out across the road instead of the river.
>
> Aleyooty Ammachi [Rahel's grandmother] looked more hesitant. As though she would have liked to turn around but couldn't. Perhaps it wasn't as easy for her to abandon

> the river. With her eyes she looked in the direction that her husband looked. With her heart she looked away. (30)

Here, the photograph reveals not only the routine dominance of man over woman, it shows the "anthropophagic" aspect of the man toward his wife (Brilmyer2019, 26), an aspect of the ontological couple in which one subsumes the other.

These photographs only come to portray good or bad aspects of the upper-caste world. 'Untouchable' Velutha and his ancestors do not appear in the photographs that emerge in the novel. However, Dalit erasure is not only restricted to photos or to the practice of untouchability, Brahmins stigmatize and thus exploit them further by marking the material world into binaries of un/touchable and im/pure. Invariably, the members of brahminic castes align themselves with superior (useful) things. The things that Untouchables make become touchable and desirable, but their makers remain untouchable. Rarely do brahminic narratives mention Dalit labor or their artistic work; they mainly record acts of brahminic dexterity and generosity. Velutha's father (and brother) remains eternally in a grateful mode, which is "as wide and deep as a river in spate" (Roy [1997] 1998, 76), to Ammu's family for paying for his eye-operation: "He felt his eye was not his own. His gratitude widened his smile and bent his back" (76). However**,** Ammu's family never acknowledges Velutha and his family's loyalty to the brahminic Ipe family.

Apart from showing Dalit-Brahminic power dynamics, the photographs seem to reveal how caste-induced violence against women and lower castes comes to haunt upper-caste men. A good case in point is Pappachi's photograph. It is through his photograph that the narrative points out the queer and inexplicably violent dimensions of his personality. His photograph exudes "[a] sort of contained cruelty. […] There was a watchful stillness to the photograph that lent an underlying chill to the warm room in which it hung" (51). For no apparent reason, he beats his wife, Mammachi, throws her out of the house on a whim, and even inflicts pain on Ammu when she is a young girl. In fury, "he tore down curtains, kicked furniture and smashed a table lamp" (181). Once when he flogs Ammu and she does not cry, Pappachi cuts Ammu's favorite gumboots to shreds with pink shears to hurt her: "The scissors made snicking scissor sounds. […] It took ten minutes for her beloved gumboots to be completely shredded. When the last strip of rubber had rippled to the floor, her father looked at her with cold, flat eyes, and rocked and rocked and rocked. Surrounded by a sea of twisting, rubber snakes" (181). Damaging Ammu's boots is tantamount to controlling her movement. Pappachi's hostilities show the pathological nature of caste. Since caste functions only by negating desire, it frustrates men like Pappachi. In the novel, when Ammu-like women are abandoned by their families and end up on the streets, even policemen, carrying within themselves

men like Pappachi, humiliate such women by cutting their hair on the pretext of maintaining order, thus marking their bodies as pariah-like so that they can be eternally exploited**.**

Photographs decode complex dynamics of caste and its effects on characters. The absence of Dalits from these photos put the question of caste back at the center of caste discourse. The construction of reality as brahminic and the brahminic erasure of Dalits through the use of photography take an immediate political edge when one considers Barthes' perspective on the use of photography as a system of representation:

> I call 'photographic referent' not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. […] I can never deny that the thing has been there. (Barthes [1980] 2010, 76)

Barthes' formulations help to show how photography produces and reinforces Brahminism in Roy's novel**.** Whereas the Ipe family's photographs represent important moments of their life—marriage celebrations, character's younger selves, dead ancestors, other locations—and lend stability and substantiality to brahminic past and present, they resolutely shut out the Dalits. In line with caste notions of rebirth or *dvija*, photographs give a kind of afterlife to Roy's upper-caste characters, making subtle bodies (*sūkṣma śarīra*), not gross bodies (*sthūla śarīra*), return (see chapter III, 106).

3. "Stacked spoons" and other things

Small, subtle, and inconsequential things emerge in the novel in unexpected ways, taking queer shapes and acting as if imitating the transgressive acts of characters. Things also play a vital role in constructing human behavior as normative and non-normative; in so doing, they also become queer or proper things in themselves. Using a variety of "small things" Roy engages with big and complicated things such as sexuality and caste. When Rahel and Estha indulge in the incest act, the narrative voice tells the reader that they fit each other "[l]ike stacked spoons. Like familiar lovers' bodies" (Narayan [1945] 1993, 20). Such a comparison suggests the innocuous nature of Rahel and Estha's incest act as it involves no transgression, neither caste-based nor on gender lines—if one considers that Estha emerges as a queer figure in the novel. Simply put, their incestuous act is as sterile as the positioning of "stacked spoons"; it poses no danger. Also, unlike the (cross-caste) sexual transgression of Ammu and Velutha that occurs in an unmarked space, Rahel and Estha's incest take place in the secrecy of the Ayemenem house—a secrecy that the text throughout associates with closets, cabinets, and cupboards. More importantly, the incest act courts such a

homely, sterile simile because they take refuge in each other‘s bodies, not to satisfy desire but to assuage their childhood traumas.

However, in another context, when Ammu and Velutha have sex, rather than **“**stacked spoons,” their sex act is compared with lively, earthy, and fluid things. It is the antithesis of Rahel and Estha’s incestuous act because it is cross-caste and thus has the potential to subvert caste order. Therefore the text refers to the possibility of Ammu and Velutha having sex as “unthinkable” (256), thus stressing the hold of caste norms on the Ayemenem village. After having sex, Ammu and Velutha hardly speak, they focus their attention on things such as grass, leaves, soil as if dreading the consequences of their transgressive act**.** They laugh at a spider, they call “*Chappu Thamburan,*” that pretends to be dead to save itself from predatory beetles (338-339). Danger makes the spider feign an inanimate state, making it hide itself in the garbage. The spider’s situation and its location in the garbage echo Velutha’s precarious position in the village. Despite his untouchability, he goes on to have sex with an upper-caste woman which puts his life in danger. The narrative voice has already warned that “*if he fought he couldn’t win*” (217). Whereas the spider dies of natural causes, Velutha is tortured to death for his transgressive act. Even Velutha’s paralyzed brother, Kuttapen—a “safe Paravan” (207)—, fares better than Velutha. However, their being safe or unsafe Paravans do not save them from brahminic violence. Velutha is tortured to death for desiring and actually ‘relishing’ touchable Ammu. Kuttapen falls and gets severely injured in his attempt to reach (touch and taste) the coconut fruit.

Transgressions of various kinds are aided by objects. By using matter and material objects such as powder, kajal, mukhtars, clothes, fake breasts, men turn into women and perform in the village temple, and children indulge in acts of cross-dressing and role-playing outside Velutha’s hut. Through these acts, they invert the normative schema. However, these actions by men and by children take place either in a hyper brahminic or in a non-brahminic realm respectively**:** the gender-transgressive performance of the men takes place in the heart of the Ayemenem village, that is, its temple, whereas the children experiment with non-normative gender roles outside the Ayemenem village, across the river where Velutha lives. Both of these locations permit the queering of bodies because they are marked by (nonhuman) ontologies of the sacred and the abject. In other words, only outside the Ayemenem village can non-normative acts transpire **(**see chapter IV, section 2). Within the brahminic domain, the queering of caste norms evoke animosity. Therefore when the policemen see Velutha’s painted fingernails while torturing him, they laugh in a sinister manner and find an additional reason to continue the torture.

As inanimate things collaborate with human bodies, they take on different meanings and give different meanings to human bodies. Such interactions between things and humans seem fluid,

free, fecund, and organic. This fluidity is seen in Velutha and Ammu's relationship, in the twin's love for their mother, Ammu, uncle Chacko, and Velutha, and in the Kathakali performance of male artists toward their art. The text demonstrates a striking example of Estha's fluid relationship with his surroundings. Since his family fails him, he turns to objects, finds refuge in them, and stabilizes the confusions of his inner world:

> Over time [Estha] had acquired the ability to blend into the background of wherever he was—into bookshelves, gardens, curtains, doorways, streets—to appear inanimate, almost invisible to the untrained eye. It usually took strangers a while to notice him even when they were in the same room with him. It took them even longer to notice that he never spoke. Some never noticed at all.
>
> Estha occupied very little space in the world. (10-11)

By seeking refuge in things, Estha resists the heterosexual norms of his family and community. (Estha's manner and unfolding recall Velutha's situation. Like him, Estha develops as an outcast, albeit in a sexual sense.) However, objects do not always act as allies; they also restrain, halt, damage, and expose especially when dominion replaces relationality in human and nonhuman interactions. Photographs that appear in the novel show children and women in constraining postures and shut out the Dalits despite their overwhelming presence, whereas the same photographs reveal men as controlling and proud.

When characters disregard and intrude upon the world of things, the results are far from fruitful as we see in Chacko and Baby Kochamma's attitude. Chacko leaves pain and waste the ways he engages with humans and things. Baby Kochamma exhibits similar dominating streaks in her approach toward human and nonhuman others. She controls the lives of Ammu and her children, plots Velutha's death, and tries to subdue and order nature through her gardening. Her obsession with order echoes brahminic fixation with caste order (see chapter IV, section 5). However, unlike Chacko and Baby Kochamma, the most explicit link between the notions of relationality and untouchability is manifested in the behavior of Pappachi. After retirement, whereas he becomes redundant, his wife, Mammachi, is "still in her prime" (47), and is running a successful business. Jealousy makes him beat her. Once when Chacko sees Pappachi beating Mammachi, Chacko warns him not to touch Mammachi ever again. Pappachi stops beating her, but he also stops speaking to her. Although a scientist, Pappachi ends up practicing untouchability against his own wife. Thus, the text indicates how the practice of untouchability mutates in the brahminic psyche.

Roy's "small things" are all those human and nonhuman entities that sustain and are sustained by each other. Roy's thematic engagement exceeds caste, (neo)colonialism, or capitalism. When Roy says "another world is not only possible, she's on her way. Maybe many of us won't be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing" (Roy 2003, 75); she makes it apparent that her concerns are not only restricted but go beyond the human. *The God of Small Things* considers everyone—Velutha, Ammu and her children, and Chappu Thamburan (a spider), but, increasingly, Roy's concerns extend from everyone to everything. To engage with the existing world and the world that is "on her way," one of the characters in her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, poses a question and suggests an answer. "*How to tell a shattered story? By slowly becoming everybody. No. By slowly becoming everything*" (2017, 436), thus emphasizing the materiality of the world in which the human is embedded.

VI
Caste and English Language Politics in India

Although the subversive use of English in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is striking, it takes several readings of the text to excavate the English language's interface with Brahminism. The layered use of English with its embedded caste politics manifests itself like a complicated brahminic ritual that hints at the pervasiveness of caste in India. Etymologically the word 'ritual' derives from the Latin *ritualis,* that which pertains to rite. In Sanskrit, the word *rta* means order (rule, truth), and it appears in ancient Vedic texts along with other Hindu concepts such as *dharma* (duty) and *karma* (action) which suggests the centrality of *rta* not only in a general religious context but also in its role in instituting the caste system (Varma 2021, 62, 72, 274). The moment in ritual, Judith Butler says, "is a condensed historicity; it exceeds in past and future directions" (1997b, 3). Taking cues from Butler's idea of the power of ritual, I suggest that when upper-caste characters perform seemingly benign brahminic rituals, these acts are not restricted to the moment in which they occur. Rather, they belong and carry within themselves other times, other histories. Foucault makes the larger time frames that discourses inhabit clear when he says "discourse is not life; its time is not ours" (quoted in Butler 2015a, 5) Through repetitions, the hollow gestures and mundane rituals in time become filled with anti-Dalit prejudice on the one hand and pro-brahminic idealization on the other, and thus conventions are produced. In addition to observing highly legible anti-Dalit and pro-Brahmin conventions, upper castes use the English language like they would any other brahminic ritual while debarring lower castes from using it. Two kinds of English appear in the novel. One aligns itself with brahminic 'purity' because it is fluent and correct; therefore, it emerges as 'touchable' English which has two kinds: 'proper' English and 'brahminic' English. Characters who speak proper English are culturally deracinated, and those who speak brahminic English are embedded in Indian culture—they use English as one of the many Indian languages. However, the opposite of touchable English and its inflections is an 'impure' English (and thus untouchable), which assumes caste meanings associated with the brahminic practice of untouchability. Through these differing formulations of English, the brahminic castes strengthen their hegemony.

R. K. Narayan calls the English language "an absolutely *swadeshi* language" (1988, 26). He writes, "We are not attempting to write Anglo-Saxon English. The English language […] is now undergoing a process of Indianization in the same manner as it adopted U.S. citizenship over a century ago, with the difference that it is the major language there but here one of the fifteen" (Narayan 1979, 22). Narayan's approach to the English language involves bringing it in line with "our own habits of thoughts" and assimilating its idiom to Indian life, an idiom in which caste consciousness is embedded.[115] I call this brahminic English. Characters who speak brahminic English, as opposed to those who speak proper or Anglo-Saxon English are not deracinated Indians. Whereas both types are touchable English, they serve different purposes. The former serves what Narayan calls "our caste consciousness," the latter's use suggests deracination. Despite this difference, both the brahminic and Anglo-Saxon Englishes stand in contrast to untouchable English.

In (post)colonial modernity, caste, in addition to its ontology of '(un)touch,' distances itself from the body of the Untouchable through the use of English. Historically, Untouchables have always been denied access to formal learning.[116] Even in modern democratic India, brahminic castes structurally exclude Dalits from receiving formal education, mainly the education imparted through English-medium instruction. The first two sections of this chapter examine how *The God of Small Things* frames the English language as 'un/touchable' to strengthen Brahminism whereas the last three sections, reading Roy's novel along with other cultural and political tracts, demonstrate how the English language's interface with caste and sexuality has shaped present-day India.

1. "I will only speak in English": The Brahminic Ipe Family

In *The God of Small Things* the narrative presents the brahminic Ipe family's English as superior. Not even once is their English judged. Pappachi, the retired Patriarch, speaks 'proper' English, which takes the semblance of brahminic purity, like some prized antique that the family possesses. The text makes references to Pappachi's English and suggests that the presence of English in the Ipe family is timeless. This is not asserted but hinted at when the reader learns about the baptism of

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[115] Narayan is not alone in aspiring to brahminize English. Khushwant Singh wrote, "I am entirely in favour of making English an Indian language on our terms. Maul it, misuse it, mangle it out of shape but make it our own *bhasha.* The English may not recognise it as their language; they can stew in their own juice. It is not their *baap ki jaidaad*— ancestral property" (2001, para. 1)

[116] In brahminic culture, nonbrahminic people such as Dalits were not allowed to take formal education and even when such efforts were made, they were resisted and crushed by upper castes. Geetha B. Nambissan (1996) lists historical and cultural reasons for the low level of education among Dalits in contemporary India. Dalits (and other low-caste groups) who were converting to other religions were provided state protection as early as 1850 by the British through the Caste Disabilities Removal Act, which ensured their right to inheritance and property and thus dignity. However, upper-caste resistance to caste equality is such that Dalits are still fighting for equal rights.

Rahel's great grandfather, Punnyan Kunju, and the blessings he receives from the Patriarch of Antioch, the sovereign head of the Syrian Christian Church:

> In 1876, when Baby Kochamma's father [and Rahel's great grandfather, Punnyan Kunju] was seven years old, his father had taken him to see the Patriarch who was visiting the Syrian Christians of Kerala. They found themselves right in front of a group of people whom the Patriarch was addressing in the westernmost verandah of the Kalleny house, in Cochin. Seizing his opportunity, his father whispered in his young son's ear and propelled the little fellow forward. The future Reverend, skidding on his heels, rigid with fear, applied his terrified lips to the ring on the Patriarch's middle finger, leaving it wet with spit. The Patriarch wiped his ring on his sleeve, and blessed the little boy. Long after he grew up and became a priest, Reverend Ipe continued to be known as *Punnyan Kunju*—Little Blessed One—and people came down the river in boats all the way from Alleppey and Ernakulam, with children to be blessed by him. (Roy [1997 1998], 22-23)

Here we do not know in which language the boy's father instructs him to touch the Patriarch, but we know that this boy, as an adult man, discusses biblical matters with Father Mulligan in English. Since the boy and his father sit in the front row, it indicates their class and caste privilege, and their close association with the missionaries suggests the use of English by the Ipes' forefathers. Although the English language is only a few hundred years old in India, it seems to have found a fertile place in the Ipe household.

Such as insistence on establishing an intimate bond with the English language pervades Indian writings in English. Frequently, brahminic writers trace English in their families to three or four generations.[117] Such a long-standing use of the language adds to their brahminic prestige. The narrative takes special care to emphasize that Pappachi is a 'pukka' anglophile, who takes pride in the English language and culture, both being important markers of his identity. The narrative condemns him for several reasons, but not for his English. Pappachi's sister, Baby Kochamma, and his son, Chacko both share Pappachi's enthusiasm for the English language. Whereas Chacko obsessively consumes English classics, Baby Kochamma gives Estha and Rahel stern lessons in English pronunciation, forcing them to "form the words properly, and be particularly careful about

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[117] Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* are good examples. Any account of the English language by Anglophone Indian writers would show that they frame it as their own, as something that runs in their bloodstream like caste. In his article "Is Hindi going the German way?" (2019), Ruchir Joshi, a Brahmin, writes about his struggles with different Indian languages while growing up except the English language in which he feels more than "adequate."

their pronunciation. Prer *NUN* sea ayshun. *Rej-Oice in the Lo-Ord Or- Orlways. And again I say rej-Oice, RejOice, RejOice, And again I say rej-Oice*" (36). Within the same household, attitudes toward and the relationship with the English language change. The Ipe family's English is touchable, but it mutates from Pappachi's (Chacko's and Baby Kochamma's) proper English to Ammu and her children Estha and Rahel's brahminic English. Unlike Pappachi, Ammu and her children develop ownership of English naturally, and therefore, their English is not overly stressed. However, the narrative suggests that English has seeped and spread into them like mother's milk.

Touchable English and its increased brahminic purity are shown throughout the novel. Two whole pages are devoted to Estha's notebook and his mistakes (157-158), highlighting his writing errors in a way that amplifies his command of English. Rahel reads a diary entry she wrote when she was a six-year-old child about her English teacher: "*I Hate Miss Mitten and I Think Her gnickers* [sic] *are TORN*" (156). She uses the example as a comment on her own English language skills: "The laboured form of each letter and the irregular space between words was full of the struggle for control over the errant, self-willed pencil. The sentiment, in contrast, was lucid" (156). In other instances, Estha and Rahel are shown cleverly twisting words and making new meanings. They read backwards, as in Rahel's reading of a stop sign as "POTS," or Estha's reading "BE INDIAN, BUY INDIAN" as "NAIDNI YUB, NAIDNI EB" (58). When Miss Mitten, an Australian missionary, gives Estha and Rahel "a baby book—*The Adventures of Susie Squirrel*" (59), they read it backward to her. Miss Mitten complains to Baby Kochamma about their reading backward, saying "she had seen Satan in their eyes. […] They were made to write *In future we will not read backwards. In future we will not read backwards.* A hundred times. Forwards" (60). Only in a biblical but not brahminic context are such transgressions seen as satanic. The narrative indirectly hints at the inherent capacity of the Ipe children for learning: "The twins […] enjoy making up words and breaking rules of grammar, and they cherish the sound of words without even knowing their meaning" (Clarke 2007, 134). In popular discourse, Roy herself has been applauded by upper-caste writers for her linguistic transgression in brahminizing, that is to say, 'Indianizing,' the English language:

> Arundhati breaks rules in style. Starting with punctuation. While lesser writers (everyone else, stupid!) struggle to get those p's and q's in place, here is Arundhati ignoring—no, defying—those silly diktats of some antiquated grammarians, to create her own rhythms, her own unique sentences with capital letters arbitrarily strewn around in unlikely arrangements that challenge common usage. (De 2010, para 3)

Roy's style is hailed as a success for freeing the English language from its colonial context and for putting it to Indian use, or as author Sheila Dhar put it, making "English sentences perform Bharatanatyam on a tightrope of coconut fibres" ([2005] 2016), part III, para. 10). Unlike characters who speak proper English, nowhere does the narrative comment on Ammu and her twins' brahminic English, but it suggests that what began several generations earlier has now fully lodged in all three of them, with no specific event shaping it. When their English cousin Sophie Mol visits them, no misunderstanding occurs over language.

Brahminic narratives stress that whenever attempts are made from the outside to harm or reform, India has a unique capacity to defend itself (Dreze and Sen 2014, 2). Instead of fighting the external force, India contains it. Salman Rushdie corroborates this brahminic tendency in the context of the English language as well:

> I don't think it is necessary to take up the anti-colonial […] cudgels against English. What seems to me to be happening is that those people who were once colonized by the language are now readily remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it—assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers. (1991, 64)

However, what is proclaimed as Indian resilience and dexterity resembles brahminic pragmatism. Rushdie's "those people" who remake and domesticate English are the select few from the brahminic classes, but his essay reads as if he is referring to all Indians.

Unlike Rushdie, Aatish Taseer, an urban, upper-caste Indian writer, in his article, "This is an Indian House," espouses a confounding brand of Brahminism, reminiscent of the author V. S. Naipaul as discussed in chapter II. In Taseer's estimation, "the meeting of Britain and India did not produce an enduring synthesis" (Taseer 2019, para. 8). Through the example of the upper-caste architect Bijoy Jain, Taseer comments on the impact of British rule on modern-day India:

> Jain was confronting a problem that haunts every aspect of creative life in India: what to do with the past. India has produced over 40 centuries' worth of writing, painting, music and architecture, and yet when these art forms met its modern iteration through British rule, the meeting of past and present, traditional and modern, was not merely sterile—it was corrosive. (Taseer 2019, para. 11)

Taseer's well-crafted English sentences, Western education, his access to metropolitan cities across the world, and his same-sex marriage are all directly linked to the English language. Rather than constraining or corroding his life, English education has opened up several opportunities for him. His complaint about the evils of colonialism on Indian creative life seems exaggerated because artistic forms and one's relationship to art keep changing. Taseer ignores the fact that, despite India's past colonizations, there seems to have been no "corrosive" impact on the caste system. Taseer's seemingly astute reading of present-day India conceals an old brahminic streak that fears the spread of the English, and by implication equality, that may weaken caste hierarchies to which brahminic privileges are tied.

The brahminic politics surrounding the English language manifest themselves in various ways in *The God of Small Things.* One involves the loss of the native language. Although each member of the Ipe family speaks English, it is through Chacko—Rahel and Estha's Oxonian uncle—that the supposed linguistic alienation of the Ipes from their native language and culture is staged. Chacko claims this alienation. He tells Estha and Rahel that as Anglophiles they are lost and what is lost cannot be retrieved and that they are "trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away" (Roy [1997] 1998, 52). This commonly held trope of losing a language among the Indian elite rings false in the case of the Ipes because their native language Malayalam flourishes all around them as a living and thriving language always available to be used. The rhetoric of loss concerning a language makes sense in exile narratives, but in the case of the Ipes, their alienation is self-imposed.

For no apparent reason, Chacko then goes on to tell Estha and Rahel about the impact of colonialism: "We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore. Our sorrows will never be sad enough. Our joys never happy enough. Our dreams never big enough. Our lives never important enough. To matter" (53). Chacko's monologue seems contrived because what he says is beyond the children's comprehension. Estha and Rahel hardly respond to him. Also, no responsible adult would give such a grim version of colonialism to seven-year-old children. Chacko hardly seems to care about Estha and Rahel or people who are dependent on him. Rather he emerges as "the embodiment of white cultural capital and pretensions" (Menon 2011, 74). Here, Chacko's intended audience seems to be the Empire. His dramatic listing effectively addresses the issue of colonization but erases Brahminism. By no stretch of the imagination does Chacko's pronoun "our" include Dalits. His emphasis on the colonial context and erasure of caste render his complaints pro-brahminic. By posing as marginalized, he appropriates the truly marginalized. If anything, he seems to have only benefited from the colonial legacy.

The speech Chacko gives to Estha and Rahel can be juxtaposed with Nehru's 1947 speech "Tryst with Destiny" which Nehru delivered on the eve of Indian independence. What Chacko's words were to the children, Nehru's speech was to the Indian masses—that is, incomprehensible. In Nehru's time, the literacy rate in India was less than 17 percent (Patel 1996, 75). Those who understood English were less than one percent, which meant he ignored 98 percent of the Indian population. Nehru was mainly addressing English-speaking brahminic India and the Western world. Nehru used the pronoun "we" thirty-seven times in his speech, but his "we" disregarded those for whom it was meant (Nehru 1947, 1-2). In their respective positions, both the Oxford-educated Chacko and the Cambridge-educated Nehru discounted those they were supposed to serve.

Chacko's claim to alienation seems unconvincing in both brahminic and colonial contexts**.** In a brahminic context, Brahmins cannot claim alienation or loss because it is the Brahmins who distance themselves from Untouchables through the everyday practice of untouchability. Not only is this positioning self serving, it ultimately leads to Dalit humiliation and subordination. In the same vein, in a non-brahminic context, by appropriating narratives of exile in self-serving ways, upper castes camouflage and augment their privilege. In Indian writings in English upper-caste immigrant characters or Indian writers themselves, as Aijaz Ahmed notes, often inflate "the choice of immigration into a rhetoric of exile" (2008, 243). Ahmad adds that they "use words like 'exile' or 'diaspora'—words which have centuries of pain and dispossession inscribed in them—to designate what is, after all, only personal convenience" (85).[118] Like Chacko, the anglicized brahminic elite repeatedly frames the question of the English language in terms of cultural loss and alienation set in by imperialism, which over time finds legitimacy in popular discourse while deemphasizing the pro-brahminic use of English.

The Ipe family's proclamation about the accident of their being Anglophiles seems disingenuous because they conceal their complicity in wanting to become anglicized. Even though Rahel and Estha use English effortlessly, the Ipe family pays close attention to their English education. The Ipes' obsession with English transpires when Chacko's English wife, Margaret, and their daughter, Sophie Mol, visit them. Baby Kochamma flaunts her knowledge of Shakespeare not only "to announce her credentials to Margaret Kochamma [but] to set herself apart from the Sweeper Class" (Roy [1997 1998], 144). She instructs Rahel and Estha to speak 'proper' English:

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[118] Also see Amitava Kumar's (2004) book *Away: The Indian Writer as an Expatriate* that gives a glimpse into the lives of several Indian authors living or having lived abroad, suggesting that their relationship with language (English) and place (the West) is not enforced. Rather, they actively sought both. The mildly nostalgic tone reflected in exile narratives appears absurd here because in each case, language and mobility suggest class and caste privilege.

> That whole week Baby Kochamma eavesdropped relentlessly on the twins' private conversations, and whenever she caught them speaking in Malayalam, she levied a small fine which was deducted at source. From their pocket money. She made them write lines—'impositions' she called them—*I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English*. A hundred times each. When they were done, she scored them out with her red pen to make sure that old lines were not recycled for new punishments. (36)

By deploying the English language like a sacred ritual, the Ipes entrench caste hierarchies of high and low within the private space of the family.

Chacko's florid assertions about his self-perpetuated deracination reveal his latent Brahminism. In common parlance, upper-caste people, like Chacko, legitimize their use of touchable English in the same way they naturalize their caste status by giving it a divine hue and connecting it to the Vedic theory of karma (Singh 2018a, 2695-2699). Also, whereas Chacko laments the English language's intrusion on native cultures and languages, his own family and community simultaneously embrace it and guard it from the Dalits. Touchable English stays within the upper-caste Ipe family and travels seamlessly from one generation to the next, but without leaking into Dalit lives.[119] Underneath the Ipe family's grievances against, or love for, the English language runs the brahminic idea of caste that blocks the learning of Dalits. Like caste, English erects impenetrable borders between people. By using English, the brahminic Ipes communicate with the rest of the world for personal and professional reasons and thus maintain their privilege locally. Dalits like Velutha have no such access, which marginalizes them in both local and global contexts. When Sophie Mol dies, her (English) mother, Margaret, slaps Estha out of spite. Margaret later apologizes for her behavior, but she remains oblivious to Velutha's wrongful imprisonment for the purported abduction of the children and his subsequent death by police torture. There is a complete disconnect between Margaret's and Velutha's worlds. A brahminic boy receives an apology for a wrongful slap, but a Dalit murder is collectively forgotten.

English language politics as it unfolds in the novel has its roots in India's colonial history. When the British established a strong foothold in India and introduced English, the Brahmins benefited the most as they were already accustomed to reading and writing. The English found it "much easier to instruct" Calcutta Hindus or "Bengali Brahmins" (Viswanathan 1990, 43-44). They also noted that, compared to other communities, the Brahmins "were fonder of gain and other lucrative employment that required knowledge of English" (44). In 1947 when the British left, the

[119] Tanika Chakraborty and Shilpi Kapoor Bakshi (2016*)* have shown the direct link between the English language and better wages.

Indian elite used the English language to consolidate brahminic power over the masses. The brahminic castes ensured that the English language remained an elite language. It was used as the key language of the law, medicine, and higher education in independent India. On the eve of Indian Independence, Prime Minister Nehru addressed his countrymen in English, a language used by less than one percent of its population (Agrawala 1977, 45). The elite, with all their Gandhian pretensions, used English as the British did—to rule. In public life, they claimed loyalty toward the national language—Hindi—and encouraged the polyglot nation to adopt Hindi, but they sent their own children to English-language convent schools. Taking a terse dig at the powerful chief minister of Bengal, Jyoti Basu, someone scribbled a graffiti on a wall: "My son won't learn English; your son won't learn English; but Jyoti Basu will send his son abroad to learn English" (quoted in Rushdie 1991, 65). The construction of these differing aspirations toward the English language sustained and strengthened brahminic order, a strategy that continues to shape present-day India.

Brahminic use of or negotiation with the English language manifests in ways that ultimately upholds caste. The upper castes enact their social superiority by speaking English, not by exercising caste rituals. Simply put, while caste grants the Ipe family members privileges in the Ayemenem village, it also shields them and consolidates their interests in non-Indian locations where they go for work or study. The overpowering hold of caste or of the practice of untouchability on Roy's brahminic characters is such that it tends to dissolve or deflect other forms of discrimination such as racism. In *The God of Small Things,* Margaret and Chacko's wedding photograph obliquely suggests the centrality of touch, not skin color, in the everyday lives brahminic characters:

> Margaret Kochamma's mother was looking away, out of the photograph, as though she would rather not have been there.
>
> Margaret Kochamma's father had refused to attend the wedding. He disliked Indians, he thought of them as sly, dishonest people. He couldn't believe that his daughter was marrying one.
>
> In the right hand corner of the photograph, a man wheeling his bicycle along the curb had turned to stare at the couple. (Roy [1997] 1998, 240)

The photograph is a study of English racism. Margaret's mother's "looking away" indicates her indifference to the wedding, whereas her father's absence establishes his emphatic disapproval. The photograph also hints at the underlying hostility of the English toward cross-racial unions when a passer-by turns to "stare" at the unconventional couple. Whereas watching or looking at wedding couples suggests curiosity, validation, and interest, staring leaves no ambiguity about its intrusive

intent. However, at no point does English racism emerge in Chacko's experience. The photograph suggests English racism through 'absences,' 'presences,' and "stares," but the narrative does not say anything about the peculiar absence of the Ipe family members at the wedding of their only son, or whether their absence is connected to any India–specific "ism."

However, this way of caste-specific seeing or experiencing the world is not only restricted to the Ipe household. V. S. Naipaul, in his book *The Writer and the World,* writes that Indians do not see what is so obvious to others. In *Literary Occasions* ([2003] 2011), Naipaul elaborates on his thesis by referring to the autobiographies of three eminent Indians: Nehru, Gandhi, and Nirad C. Chaudhari. Through these examples, Naipaul concludes that Indians are so deeply embedded in ritual and caste they see people as "their designations and functions, and places little more than their names" ([2003] 2011), 139). Naipaul bases his thesis implicitly on caste. Looking in from a unique position, heavily shaped by an imperial gaze, as discussed in chapter II, Naipaul makes astute judgments about Indians. However, in a brahminic context, Naipaul mirrors the men he criticizes because his criticism of India assumes a one-dimensional trajectory, as it predominantly negatively focuses on non-brahminic people while remaining sympathetic to brahminic Indians. Naipaul's biases surface most explicitly in how people speak English, thus expressing a form of un/touchability that is observed by imposing caste notions of im/purity on the English language.

This Naipaulian way of understanding and responding to the world also marks the upper-caste Ipe family. Although the Ipes do not practice caste in the religious sense, they nevertheless display no moral compunction in exploiting Dalits. By embracing British culture and appropriating its language, the Ipes consolidate their position in the Ayemenem village. Curiously, Roy's upper-caste characters who speak Anglo-Saxon English (Chacko and his aunt and parents and grandparents) are at ease in both local and international locations, maintaining their hegemony in the village on the one hand while partaking in what the West has to offer on the other. But characters who speak brahminic English (Ammu and her children) inhabit precarious positions everywhere. The transgressive Ammu who wants to live and work in the Hague with her "hybrid" children dies in a Kottayam hotel room whereas her daughter Rahel ends up working at a petrol station in Washington. Strikingly, while the Ayemenem police Inspector calls Ammu *Veshya*, Rahel hears a stalker in Washington saying to her, "*Hey, you! Black Bitch! Suck my dick!*" (Roy [1997] 1998, 189). In sharp contrast, characters who are pro-brahminic and who also speak Anglo-Saxon English eat in restaurants, play the piano, study at Oxford, work in Austria.

Unlike the other probrahminic Ipes who seem to be at ease everywhere, Ammu's position in her own home seems vulnerable in multiple ways. It is here that she feels attacked in racial terms by her English sister-in-law, Margaret, who visits the Ayemenem house with her daughter, Sophie Mol.

Kochu Maria, the servant, takes Sophie Mol's hands in hers and inhales deeply, and Chacko tells Margaret that it is her way of kissing. " 'How marvelous,' Margaret Kochamma said. 'It's a sort of sniffing! Do the men and women do it to each other too?' " (Roy [1997] 1998, 179). Annoyed, Ammu tells her, "Oh, all the time! […]. That's how we make babies" (179). The situation becomes tense; apologies are given and demanded. Ammu barges out of the room saying, "Must we behave like some damn godforsaken tribe that's just been discovered?" (180) Ammu fiercely defends her culture and she resents the special treatment the Ipe family gives to Margaret and Sophie Mol which is withheld from Ammu and her children. Interestingly, whereas Ammu is so focused on her own humiliation, she does not see the casual humiliation to which her own family subjects Velutha and his father by not letting them inside the Ayemenem house.

The novel makes stark connections between the English language and agency or mobility. While upper-caste and Anglo-Saxon English-speaking characters work and live in Delhi, London, Vienna, and Rochester and the Pillai family members who have limited access to the English language remain confined to Indian cities, Dalit characters who have no access to the English language (Velutha and his father and brother) remain confined to the Ayemenem village and even when they go somewhere, the novel does not identify the locations.

Despite the problematics of the English language, it brought its own ingrained value system to India, which has curbed caste to some degree. This is conspicuous in British policies as well as in the works of Christian missionaries who did not treat Dalits as Untouchables.[120] If Dalit subordination persisted, it was only due to Brahminism. Although the Indian elite mocked the British civilizing mission, Dalits saw British rule as benign**.** Noted Dalit activist Chandra Bhan Prasad, much to the chagrin of the upper castes, quipped that the only problem with British rule was that "they came too late and left too early" (quoted in Munzinger 2012, 413). His provocative remark amplifies the centuries-old Dalit anger against their colonization by brahminic people. In the novel, we see both the positive and negative aspects of the English language emerging. Whereas the Ipe family deploys English to maintain its hegemony, its use inculcates a benign egalitarianism that was missing in the Ayemenem village. Pappachi's father opens a school for Dalits in Ayemenem and supports Velutha's carpentry education. Chacko harbors similar aspirations. In addition, although the English language may have weakened the caste prejudices of some upper-caste characters, they cannot be absolved from their complicity in Dalit exploitation. Despite being an anti-caste novel, it can be argued that the role of the English language consolidates Brahminism in *The God of Small Things.* For instance, whereas the novel effectively deploys the trope of "talking

[120] The British introduced several harsh laws particularly against non-brahminic minority subcultures (see chapter VII, section 1.1), but they never practiced untouchability.

back to empire" through the use of the English language and thus challenges colonialism, its engagement with Brahminism lacks a similar emphasis**.** Velutha, though central to the novel, is hardly allowed to speak. The use of touchable English in both brahminic and colonial contexts energizes Brahminism. The narrative powerfully utilizes the English language to castigate the Empire and its neo-colonizing ways, but it underplays pro-brahminic—or anti-Dalit—use of the English language by upper castes in the local context. As we see, only the brahminic characters go to live, work, and study in Anglophone countries. Unlike them, Dalits in Ayemenem have neither access to material things nor to immaterial ones such as the English language. The ownership of the English language and its manipulative use by the brahminic castes is one way to exclude and exploit Dalits. Mammachi, "with impenetrable Touchable logic" says, "[I]f only Velutha hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer (Roy [1997] 1998, 75). The Spivakian notion of "affirmative sabotage" (Spivak 2012, 4), which argues that by using the master's tools one can change the system from within, does not seem to work here. The brahminic system only allows Brahmins, not Dalits, the right to formal education. Mammachi seemingly illogical remark makes perfect sense in the context of caste. Velutha, who hopes to transform society by joining the Communist Party, is neither allowed to learn anything from brahminic systems nor could he gain anything by destroying them. When Velutha seeks the help of the Communist leader at a critical point in his life, the leader acts against Velutha. Unlike brahminic Pappachi and Chacko and communist Pillai, it is the German carpenter who teaches Velutha carpentry skills, because no notion of untouchability sits between them.

Postcolonial theorists term the adoption of the English language and culture as mimicry. They seem to miss how mimicry is used as a tool for Dalit exploitation in a brahminic context. In other words, the upper castes use mimicry to a particular effect, without giving up their brahminic identity (Das 2010, 111-114). Even as colonized subjects, they shape their subjectivities by staging complex moves of co-opting while maintaining distance from non-brahminic others (Chandra 2012, 167), thus emblazoning English on the already existing caste-hierarchies to intensify caste order. With regard to English in India, Rushdie observes, "The children of independent India seem not to think of English as being irredeemably tainted by its colonial provenance. They use it as an Indian language, as one of the tools they have to hand" (Rushdie 1991, 64). He further says, "The English language ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago. Perhaps 'Commonwealth Literature' was invented to delay the day when we rough beasts actually slouch into Bethlehem. In which case, it's time to admit that the centre cannot hold" (70). Rushdie's essay expresses two things: the brahminization of English, and the misrepresentation of a tiny English-speaking brahminic elite as representative of all Indians.

However, it would be incorrect to deny that such a pragmatic adoption of the colonizer's language, and by implication culture, does not affect the colonized—that is, the English-speaking brahminic elite. It can, however, be argued that caste is so deeply entrenched in their culture that the external influences either in their progressive forms such as modernity and its institutions or in their regressive forms such as racism do not penetrate brahminic culture. Epistemologically, it is caste or the practice of untouchability that is central to brahminic culture. Even in the discourse surrounding the English language in India, caste notions are extant as is evident in the words of critic Jaithirth Rao who says that the English language "may not touch everyone, but its influence touches everyone (Rao 2005, para. 4). Through a clever framing of English as touchable, brahminic castes use language in self-serving ways in the same way as the British, which highlights the parallels between Brahminism and colonialism.

2. 'Untouchable' English

By outsourcing everything Brahmins consider abject to the Dalit body in everyday life, Brahmins emerge as Brahmins. Likewise, they impose the socio-cultural ontology of 'touchable' and 'untouchable' on the English language. Thus, Roy's narrative displays two kinds of English: One is the 'proper' English that the members of the Ipe family speak, and the other is the 'flawed' English that other people speak in Ayemenem. Unlike the proper English of the Ipes, only the flawed English of the Pillais attracts metaphors of untouchability to itself. By contrasting their English with others, brahminic characters seem to assert their superiority. When Rahel with her uncle Chacko visits Comrade Pillai's family, touchable and untouchable dimensions of English come to play an important role. Although the Pillais are touchable, their English and lower-middle-class status set them apart from the brahminic Ipes, which is reflected in Chacko and Rahel's behavior. Comrade Pillai introduces his family, including his six-year-old son, Lenin, and twelve-year-old niece, Latha. Pillai asks Latha to recite a poem for the guests:

> "Today I would like to recite to you a poem by Sir Walter Scott entitled 'Lochinvar'." She clasped her hands behind her back. A film fell over her eyes. Her gaze was fixed unseeingly just above Chacko's head. She swayed slightly as she spoke. At first Chacko thought it was a Malayalam translation of 'Lochinvar.' The words ran into each other. The last syllable of one word attached itself to the first syllable of the next. It was rendered at remarkable speed.
>
> '*O, young Lochin vorhas scum out of the vest,*
>
> Through wall the vide Border his teed was the bes,

> Tand savissgood broadsod heweapon sadnun,
> *Nhe rod all unamed, and he rod all lalone.'* (Roy [1997] 1998, 271)

The narrative voice goes to great lengths to describe Latha's English skills, but as it does so, it also indicates the brahminic recoil from Latha's English, transcribing her mispronounced words with extraordinary accuracy, as if her every impure utterance augments brahminic purity. The Pillai family's inability to perform the ritual of English correctly reduces their stature. While the focus is on Latha's recital, the narrative comments on Pillai's babu English:

> 'What is the news? How is your daughter adjusting?' [Pillai] insisted on speaking to Chacko in English.
>
> 'Oh fine. She's fast asleep right now.'
>
> 'Oho. Jet lag, I suppose,' Comrade Pillai said, pleased with himself for knowing a thing or two about international travel. (273)

The brahminic narrative mocks the Pillais' English, and yet it attempts to present Chacko's response to the Pillai children's English as encouraging and convivial. English emerges here as a powerful presence. The Pillai family's English stands in complete contrast to the Ipes' Oxford English, indicating their class difference. The brahminic children Rahel and Estha's mistakes reflect their English skills, but this strategy is reversed in Lenin and Latha's case who recite English poems with precision but with a comical effect. The narrative connects the Pillai family's flawed English to their inherent inferiority. Oblivious to the brahminic Ipes' gaze, the Pillais continue exhibiting their English skills as if seeking approval from Chacko, the Rhodes scholar.

Whereas the Pillais' English is dissected, no such gaze is cast on the Ipes. Both Lenin and Latha are asked to show their English skills, Rahel—although a child—is curiously exempted from such demonstration. Also, Rahel and Estha know Lenin well, yet they only watch Lenin from a distance, without ever talking or playing with him, thus demonstrating a behavior influenced by linguistic and class borders. Furthermore, characters who speak touchable English are portrayed sympathetically as opposed to those who speak untouchable English. The text describes Ammu's aspirations as mundane, but it rebuffs the Pillai family's valid enthusiasm for the English language when it points out that there is "a lot of ambition packed into that little hot room" (275). But it simply reports that the Ipes go abroad for further education and work, that Ammu expects to find work in the United Nation and intends to employ "a Dutch ayah" (160) and live in The Hague with her two children.

Although the Pillais are touchable, their English lowers them in the eyes of the brahminic Ipes. The brahminic obsession with linguistic purity triggers negative judgments against the Pillais' linguistic impurity, which then leads to other kinds of judgments. The scene depicting the Pillai family's flawed English intensifies Pillai's fraudulent character, but it also unduly denies him the fatherly pride he takes in his son and niece's English. When Latha recites the poem, the text mocks Pillai's pretentious behavior: "Through the rest of his niece's recitation, [Pillai] sat staring meditatively down at the floor, his chin cupped in the palm of his hand, tapping his right foot in time with the metre and cadence of the poem. With his other hand he massaged the exquisitely arched instep of his left foot" (272). His earnest, fatherly response to a poorly recited poem makes him look doubly ridiculous. As the text goes on describing the Ipes' English, it abruptly begins to shame Pillai and his mother's body in words bordering on racism:

> Comrade Pillai arrived mid-poem, a sheen of sweat glazed his skin, his mundu was folded up over his knees, dark sweatstains spread under his Terylene armpits. In his late thirties, he was an unathletic, sallow little man. His legs were already spindly and his taut, distended belly, like his tiny mother's goitre, was completely at odds with the rest of his thin, narrow body and alert face. As though something in their family genes had bestowed on them compulsory bumps that appeared randomly in different parts of their bodies. (272)

After displaying and denouncing in stunning detail the inferiority of the Pillai's English, the text foists linguistic deficiency on their genes. English is used discursively to illustrate the superiority of touchable English by invoking its Other. The brahminic narrator takes a perverse delight in Pillai's English. Now, after establishing Latha and Pillai's English as inferior, the six-year-old Lenin is brought in to recite a poem to make a point that has already been made through Latha:

> 'Come on, Mon, it's only our Comrade Uncle—'
>
> Comrade Pillai tried to kick-start Shakespeare. *'Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your*—?'
>
> Lenin's unblinking gaze remained on Chacko. Comrade Pillai tried again.
>
> ' … *lend me your*—?'
>
> Lenin grabbed a handful of banana chips and bolted out of the front door […]
>
> '*lend me yawYERS*';
>
> Lenin shouted from the yard, over the sound of a passing bus.
>
> '*I cometoberry Caeser, not to praise him,*

> Theevil that mendoo lives after them,
> *The goodisoft interred with their bones*;'
>
> He shouted it fluently, without faltering once. Remarkable, considering he was only six and didn't understand a word of what he was saying. Sitting inside, looking out at the little dust-devil, whirling in his yard (future service contractor with a baby and Bajaj scooter), Comrade Pillai smiled proudly. (274-275)

The staging of untouchable English invigorates the Ipe family's superior English. As they encounter this distorted English, a new space opens up that they can fill with caste meaning and thus assert their brahminic hegemony. In the quotation above, the brahminic narrator terms Lenin's recitation remarkable, but the appreciation follows a quick denunciation before the sentence finishes. The six-year-old boy's "devil" ways and his future career and family attract a negative commentary. The description "little dust-devil, whirling in his yard" identifies him as an 'Untouchable.'

By identifying their English as untouchable, the text marks the Pillais as untouchable-like and separates them from the brahminic Ipes who speak fluent English. The linguistic difference produces other differences and vice versa. Not only do the brahminic Ipes speak superior English, they eat international food such as cake, chicken, ice cream, soft drinks, and jam and jelly. The Pillais speak impure English and eat food specific to their region such as red chillies, avalose oondas, and drumsticks.[121] Unlike that of the brahminic Ipes, the Pillais' flawed language and unfamiliar food mark them as inferior in a local context and illegible to the wider audience in a global context.

As noted earlier, the sympathy that the narrative holds for Estha and Rahel is withheld from Lenin and Latha. Their disparate English skills present them differently. Estha and Rahel come across as intelligent and thoughtful, while Lenin (and his father) and Latha are shown to be corrupt and grotesque when they speak English. The English language shapes children asymmetrically, which takes permanent forms as they grow into adults, reinforcing the already existing caste hierarchies. At one point, the use of English confuses matters when Pillai tells Chacko that villagers are not happy with Chacko for employing the 'Untouchable' Velutha. Chacko addresses Pillai as my dear fellow. To Pillai, Chacko's "My Dear Fellow" sounded like "an insult couched in good English, which, of course, made it a double insult—the insult itself, and the fact that Chacko thought [Pillai] wouldn't understand it. It spoiled his mood completely" (279). Peeved, Pillai warns Chacko: "Keep it in mind, Comrade, that this is not your Oxford college. For you, what is a

[121] Drumsticks are pods from the Moringa tree that are used as a vegetable in south Indian food.

nonsense, for Masses, it is something different" (279). Though Pillai here exercises his power, the brahminic dismissals follow the Pillai family throughout. Looking at Lenin's picture with his wife, the narrative voice reiterates the contempt that it has earlier shown for the child Lenin. In addition, whereas the narrative derides Pillais' aspirations for a better life, it describes the Ipes's privileges as if they were their divine right. Suppressed Brahminism also surfaces in upper-caste characters like Rahel in whom one least expects it. When Rahel returns to the Ayemenem village as an adult, she resents the newly built houses on the edge of the river by money earned from abroad— by "nurses, masons […] who worked hard and unhappily in faraway places (13). Rahel's latent brahminic fear of the changed status quo manifests as an environmental concern.

In her essay "The Doctor and the Saint," Roy accepts that all Indians, to varying degrees, carry caste attitudes (Roy 2014, 17). In *The God of Small Things*, caste manifests crudely in characters such as Baby Kochamma and Mammachi, and in a subdued form in Rahel. Aatish Taseer, an Indian writer, condemns Roy's politics, claiming that she detests the lower and middle classes: "She mocks their clothes; their trouble with English; she hates their ambitions" (Taseer 2011, para. 42). Taseer's critique rings true because the novel indeed presents the lower-middle class Pillai family members as scheming and mocks, via Rahel's narrative voice, their obsession with English and their upwardly mobile ambitions. The upper-caste Ipes fear the Pillais' aspirations in the same way the brahminic communities in Ayemenem fear the skilled and therefore "[un]safe Paravans" (Roy [1997] 1998, 207). Velutha threatens the Ayemenem's caste order and Ipes' hegemony in particular. In addition, the brahminic classes see their own reflection in the hunger of the marginalized. Whereas the Ipes and Pillais are all touchable castes, it is the linguistic border that separates them. Also, while they strive for hegemony among themselves, they unite in marginalizing Dalits. Since caste divides Indian society into four categories on a descending scale of 'purity' with Brahmins on the top of the caste pyramid, it keeps outcasts outside of its domain because of their 'impurity.' In a parallel mode, the English language divides people in the Ayemenem village on the basis of their English skills. The brahminic Ipe family has complete ownership of the English language, and other lower but touchable castes like the Pillais have some access to it, but outcasts such as Velutha and his family have no access to the English language, which reinforces their already well-entrenched marginality.

The brahminic impulse to secrecy and guarding knowledge is apparent in seminal texts like the *Manusmriti*, which states that if an Untouchable listens to or recites Sanskrit shlokas, molten iron or hot oil should be poured into their ears or mouths (Manu [n.d.]1991, 8: 271 -272). In everyday life, brahminic ways of maintaining hegemony take less violent but equally cruel forms. Eklavya's story from the *Mahabharata* is a good example. Eklavya, a low caste boy, learns archery

by eavesdropping on a Brahmin teacher, Dronacharya, while he teaches his upper-caste pupils. Eklavya becomes an accomplished archer, better than all of Dronocharya's upper-caste pupils. When Dronacharya gets to know the background story of his learning, he asks Eklavya for *gurudakshina,* a fee. In the Sanskritic tradition, a disciple is supposed to give a fee to his guru on the completion of his education and the guru decides the nature of the fee. Dronacharya asks Eklavya to give him his thumb, and Eklavaya concedes. Ekalavya's story is highly relevant in today's context because it is a story about pedagogical institutions that determine and are determined by political and social structures which exclude or impede Dalit participation. Dronacharya sees Ekalayva as an intrusive presence in his elite gurukul, a kind of residential school in ancient India. Strikingly, Manoj Das, a Brahmin author and academic, justifies Dronacharya's act while erasing Ekalvya's caste by calling him "a forest dweller" and supporting Dronacharya via untenable arguments (2017, 89-90). Such deep-seated brahminic prejudices are manifested as anti-Dalit violence, linking the epistemology of violence in present-day India to the caste system (see Jha 2016, n.p.; Muthukkaruppan 2017, 49-50).

Such instances of brahminic prejudice occur in Indian writings in English. Brahminic English is differentiated from untouchable English, not for any special reason but to signify its superiority over other forms of English, thus adding another layer of difference between the already well-entrenched caste categories. In V. S. Naipaul, for instance, once he identifies those who speak 'proper' English, it then becomes easier for him to simplify and stereotype the rest, an aspect that functions in a pro-brahminic but anti-Dalit manner. Tabish Khair has observed that Naipaul has a "tendency to identify with a strongly structured, very "stable" past—whether it is that of the Brahmin-dominated Indian (caste) system or an idealized imperial England of his imagination" (2001, 256). In colonial instances, Naipaul positions himself at the "center," and it is from "here" that he looks at the "periphery"—at the postcolonial populations**.** However, in the brahminic context, Naipaul embraces his brahminic ancestry. In both colonial and brahminic contexts, he aligns himself with the center, which betrays his innate Brahminism. By emphasizing the difference between touchable English and its other, Naipaul not only criticizes non-brahminic India but constructs a brahminic India.

The behavior of the upper-caste English-speaking Indian elite is remarkably similar to that of colonial Britain. Both use the English language in a highly strategic, controlled way to establish a social order in a caste sense in the former and in a colonial sense in the latter. The British wanted Indians to learn English, but they simultaneously despised their attempts at doing so, as we see in the attitude of the Ipes' toward the Pillai family. George Orwell, a great opponent of the Empire, in

his autobiographical novel, *Burmese Days,* illustrates the complicated role of English in colonial India. Ellis, an English businessman, resents his servant who speaks to him in English:

> "And butler!"
>
> "Yes, master?"
>
> "How much ice have we got left?"
>
> "Bout twenty pounds, master. Will only last today, I think. I find it very difficult to keep ice cool now."
>
> "Don't talk like that, damn you—'I find it very difficult!' Have you swallowed a dictionary?" Please, master, can't keeping ice cool"—that's how you ought to talk. We shall have to sack this fellow if he gets to talk English too well. I can't stick to servants who talk English. "D'you hear, butler?"
>
> "Yes, master," said the butler, and retired. (Orwell 1934, 19)

Like Ellis who gets annoyed at Butler's fluent English, in Roy's novel the brahminic Ipes scoff at the Pillais' inferior English. Whereas the Englishman's behavior can be immediately dubbed as racist, the identical brahminic scorn toward the Pillais cannot be as readily named.

The brahminical disdain of untouchable English in Indian writings manifests itself in places where its presence cannot be explained. Gauri Viswanathan, in her well-regarded book *Masks of Conquests* (1990), writes about the complex British motives for introducing the English language in colonial India. She mentions that 300 applicants turned up in a hall meant for 120 people on July 12, 1830 when Scottish missionary Alexander Duff opened a school to impart English education and reorient "English instruction in a religious direction" (Viswanathan 1990, 49). For no specific purpose, Viswanathan transcribes the rote English of Indians:

> Hordes of young Indians came begging to be taken in, crying, "Me want read your good books; oh, take me," "Me good boy," "Me poor boy," "Me know your commandments" "Thou shalt have no other gods before me; oh, take me," "Oh, take me, and I pray for you." (1990, 51)

The information about the manner of speech of Indians is inessential to Viswanathan's argument, but it demonstrates the brahminic tendency to mark the difference between brahminic English and its Other. Words such as "hordes" and "begging" hint at the lower class/caste status of those who gathered at Duff's school.

The politics surrounding the English language mirror caste politics as both work to nurture Brahminism. The strategic use of the English language by the brahminic elite, which has marginalized and excluded millions of people, led to the rise of far-right politics in modern-day India. Therefore, the right's target to abolish English and adopt Hindi as the key language resonates with many. By framing English speakers as anti-national and self-haters and Hindi supporters as patriotic and proud, the right not only politicizes the English language but foregrounds itself as the colonized and the English-speaking brahminic elite as the colonizer. Strikingly, the fiercest debates surrounding English-language politics occur only among the brahminic elite and non-elite brahminic groups in ways that both erase and appropriate Dalit subordination. In Roy's novel, it is the upper-caste characters like Chacko and Comrade Pillai who claim to speak for Velutha. Democracy grants Velutha the right to dissent, but the caste system does not. The brahminic Ipes assume that Velutha's alleged participation in a protest march reveals him to be a radical thug, an assumption that indicates their deep-rooted distrust of Velutha, even though he and his ancestors have served the Ipes loyally. The Ipes' distrust and policing show two contradictory things. First, they cannot trust Velutha because of his 'untouchability,' a belief connected to caste. Second, their acute awareness that the caste system is a socially constructed system meant to exploit and therefore Dalits are to be policed. When Velutha violates caste laws he is branded as a transgressor and when his transgressions become unmanageable he is discarded.

Such anti-Dalit workings of caste lead to fierce anti-brahminic opposition. The collective rage of the masses against the English-speaking brahminic elite is apparent when the marching comrades stop the Ipe family's car in Kottayam and mock Baby Kochamma in English since, in their eyes, her privilege is tied to the English language. Later, the Orangedrink Lemondrink man molests Estha in the theater. One can argue that he abuses Estha because he harbors a grudge against Estha's class, reflected in Estha's clothes and language: Estha has come to watch an English movie, he has relatives soon visiting him from London, and he hums English songs and uses phrases such as "pocket money" and "sleeping partner" (Roy [1997] 1998, 102). On hearing all this, the man slyly says to Estha: "First English songs, and now *Porketmunny*! [sic] Where d'you live? On the moon?" (102) Here, we see how language can create a vast gulf between people. Since the Orangedrink Lemondrink man cannot cross the rigid linguistic border, he sexually abuses Estha. After abusing him, he tells Estha, "Think of all the poor people who have nothing to eat and drink. You're a lucky rich boy, with porketmunny [sic] and a grandmother's factory to inherit. You should Thank God that you have no worries. Now finish your drink" (104-105). The man is not a well-wisher, but he fakes subservience and friendliness toward Ammu and others while holding deep resentments against their class. Also, Velutha, the upgraded 'Untouchable,' seeks a structural

change by joining the communists, which hints at his suppressed (Dalit) rage against the brahminic order.[122] Thus, the English language, via its touchable and untouchable forms, keeps caste alive.

3. English and Sexuality

If English plays a vital role in all aspects of Indian life, its powerful role in the context of desire is not mapped in brahminic discourse. One clear indication of the English language's influence over brahminic culture is seen in matrimonial advertisements. Upper-caste families seem obsessed with high-caste status, but also in pursuing English-speaking spouses for their marriageable adult children. This section focuses on the interplay of English and sexuality as it surfaces in Roy's *The God of Small Things,* and concludes by referring to the films *Kabir Singh* (dir. Sandeep Reddy Vanga, 2009) and *My Brother Nikhil* (dir. Onir, 2005) in which themes of language, sexuality, and caste intersect.

In the narratives of urban, English-educated women, themes of desire develop in unexpected ways. In Rashmi Sadana's *English Heart Hindi Heartland: The Political Life of Literature in India* (2012) one urban English-speaking interviewee says she is not happy with her marriage. She has everything in common with her husband, but, unlike him, she thinks in English, and she feels she cannot talk about things that are important to her, which makes her feel lonely. Her account points to the connection between the English language and intimacy (Sadana 2012, 116). Urban women often resort to English while talking about desire. Thus English is configured as a resource to discuss sexual and bodily experience, romantic love, and marital intimacy (Puri 1999, 127).[123] However, in popular culture such grievances and elaborations are dismissed as elitist because only by dismissing or framing women's desire as irrelevant is caste order maintained. Shilpa Phadke (2013) notes that women in India increasingly go out "for employment, education, and other activities that might be classified under the broad category 'work' [, but] going out for fun or no reason at all has little legitimacy" (299). If we approach Velutha and Ammu's relationship in *The God of Small Things* from a linguistic point of view, language and sexuality emerge in intricate ways. The linguistic border appears as rigid as the caste border in their relationship. The upper-caste, English-speaking Ammu inhabits a world that is inaccessible to Velutha, a world that is not brahminic-centric. It has Shakespeare, Oxford, and the English language. Through this other, outside world, she can see her immediate socio-cultural context and connect with Velutha without caste ideas distorting her way of seeing. If Ammu had not initiated the relationship with Velutha, it

[122] Atrocities against Dalits continue to be everyday phenomena in India. In recent years, writers, journalists, activists, and lawyers have been writing about anti-Dalit practices with greater urgency (see Gupta 2018).

[123] See Monica Bachmaan's discussion on the intersection between homosexuality and the English language in present-day India (2002, 234).

would never have materialized because her way of seeing that goes beyond the brahminic context is not available to Velutha.

It is because of this linguistic gap that Ammu and Velutha hardly speak in the novel although they make passionate love. The narrative depicts Velutha's beauty and Ammu's delirium and describes their feelings, but these feelings are not enunciated. Instead, the narrator, after brilliantly showing their transgressive lovemaking, reminds the reader that their love is "unthinkable." Therefore, this unthinkable union takes place in a non-brahminic space, that is, outside the village where they are surrounded by bees, flowers, trees, and the river, which gives the scenery an Edenic, prebrahminic tinge. But this idyllic setting is haunted by the brahminic Ayemenem village. The only way they can deal with Brahminism is by looking away, by turning their attention to nature: "[I]nstinctively they stuck to the Small Things. The Big Things lurk inside. They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things" (Roy [1997] 1998, 338). They contain their expectations: "Each time they parted, they extracted only one small promise from each other. '*Tomorrow?' 'Tomorrow.'* They knew that things could change in a day" (339). Thus, the brahminic world impinges on this private non-brahminic space. To quell their anxiety, after having sex, Ammu and Velutha turn to non-human things. They joke about a spider "who lived in a crack in the wall of the black veranda of the History House and camouflaged himself by covering his body with bits of rubbish—a sliver of wasp wing. Part of a cobweb. Dust. Leaf rot. […] Lord Rubbish" (338-339). The hostile forces that seem to destroy the spider resemble the circumstances of their lives: "Without admitting it to each other or themselves, they linked their fates, their future (their Love, their Madness, their Hope, their Infinite Joy) to his" (339). However, the spider's situation resembles Velutha's life more than Ammu's on account of his untouchability. The spider is described through words such as "Lord Rubbish," "garbage," "Leaf rot," "naked," and "snot-colored" (338-339). Such a description echoes various abject associations that Brahmins assign to Untouchables. Only outside the brahminic village, in the dark, does Velutha emerge as a god-like figure, stripped of the stigma of untouchability. Despite similarities in the spider's and Velutha's circumstances, the spider outlives Velutha and, unlike Velutha, dies of natural causes.

The lack of direct speech between Ammu and Velutha indicates the complexity of caste. In a different context, Estha asks his mother, "If you are happy in a dream, Ammu, does that count? […] If you eat fish in a dream, does it count? Does it mean you've eaten fish?" (218) Looking at Ammu and Velutha's relationship in light of Estha's questions, one perceives the surreal aspect of their relationship. Only once does Ammu speak directly to him, when she asks Velutha whether he will meet her "Tomorrow" (339), but we do not hear how Velutha responds to her. Caste but also

language play a decisive part in their tragedy. Judith Butler, reflecting on the suicide of the Italian writer Primo Levi, says that "certainly one can be pushed [to death] without someone literally there to push you" (2015a, 86). A similar question can be posed in the context of Ammu's and Velutha's tragic ends in the novel. The reader witnesses caste's push on them when there is yet no direct threat to their lives. Ammu's return journey from the police station and Velutha's walk toward his hut after his humiliating encounter with Ammu's mother have the same debilitating edge. However, compared to Ammu who is protected on account of her caste and class, Velutha puts himself in a vulnerable situation for having sex with the upper-caste Ammu. Whereas they both die in the end, the manner of their deaths is radically different.

Caste, embedded in and perpetuated through Indian languages, foregrounds Brahminism by pushing anti-caste ideas, actions, and voices into the background while stressing pro-brahminic, anti-desire, and anti-equality ideas. A language rife with caste ideology matters supremely to Brahmins because through it they distance themselves from non-brahminic Others and construct the world as pro-brahminic. Referring to anti-Dalit aspects of Indian languages, Chandra Bhan Prasad, a Dalit journalist, says, "In Indian society nothing belongs to the Dalits. Anything that is Indian, mirrors the Indian culture, value system. It will certainly contain the strong flavor of caste and prejudice against untouchables" (Prasad 2007, para. 13). He further adds that all "ethnic languages of India are carrying forward—generation after generation—the prejudices and biases of casteist Indian minds" (para. 8). Prasad elaborates on the anti-Dalit aspect of native Indian languages:

> In Hindi, to greet somebody we say *pranam*. The person bows down and there is a kind of body coordination like the folding of hands and bowing down of the head when he or she says *pranam*.
>
> According to Indian tradition, Dalits don't have the right to receive *pranam*. Because the receiver of the *pranam* had the right to bless, so Dalits never received *pranams.* In response, the person responds with *'khush raho' (be happy).* (paras. 14-15)

Considering the practice of untouchability and the fact that Brahmins will not bow and say *pranam* to Dalits, Prasad makes a compelling case for the English language because, unlike regional languages, it has no socio-cultural baggage of caste. He proposes that adopting the English language can serve as an antidote to end caste discrimination embedded in the native languages of India:

> I want to emphasis [sic] the fact that how Indian languages—be it Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Tamil or Malayalam—all of them carry the legacy of caste. But if you replace Hindi or

> Tamil by English you will greet by saying ‘good morning.’ The other person will respond saying ‘good morning.’ Both will look into the eyes and equality is established. (para. 17)

Prasad’s take on a simple, unexamined ritual of pranam seems quite extraordinary as it demonstrates how an everyday ritual powerfully performs caste history in its condensed form.

Unlike Prasad’s straightforward narrative on language and caste, Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* adopts a complicated approach, employing language-related maneuvers to show Velutha and Ammu’s relationship as plausible yet problematic. On the one hand, Velutha is assigned brahminic qualities and shown as a skilled man who quickly learns carpentry from a European mentor, but on the other hand, the skill of the English language is withheld from him. By assigning brahminic qualities and withholding English, Ammu’s relationship with Velutha and his marginality become narratable. Had he been given English skills, arguably the Brahmin-Dalit binary would have collapsed, and there would have been no story. Unlike his brother and father, the narrative depicts Velutha as an “unsafe” Paravan because of his various skills. If he also had English skills, he would not only be merely unsafe, he would be a threat to the brahminic hegemony. Salman Rushdie once remarked that to survive in the United Kingdom, it is essential to have the “right class, color, and English” (1991, 18). The same analogy applies to India except that caste replaces color in the Indian context. As a skilled carpenter, Velutha is better off compared to other Dalits in Ayemenem, but he is on the wrong side of language and caste, which accounts for his marginality.

The text also shows how the English language—as opposed to Indian languages—shapes the language of sex or sexual desire**.** The word ‘sex’ is rarely uttered in Indian languages, particularly in the context of desire and pleasure, and there are no words that describe the act of having sex. Rather, sex is described metaphorically. The upper-caste characters in *The God of Small Things* use metaphoric language to talk about sex, almost in grunts and phrases. Since the novel is written in English, it gives a graphic description of Ammu and Velutha’s lovemaking:

> He kissed her eyes. Her ears. Her breasts. Her belly. Her seven silver stretchmarks from her twins. The line of down that led from her navel to her dark triangle, that told him where she wanted him to go. The inside of her legs, where her skin was softest. Then carpenter’s hands lifted her hips and an untouchable tongue touched the innermost part of her. Drank long and deep from the bowl of her. (Roy [1997] 1998, 337)

Only in describing the “unthinkable” act of their cross-caste lovemaking that occurs outside the Ayemenem village is the language so bold and strikingly visual. Conversely, within the Ayemenem

village, brahminic characters such as Mammachi and Baby Kochamma denounce Ammu and Velutha's sexual transgression in a way that makes their disgust apparent. Baby Kochamma says: "*How could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed? They have a particular smell, these Paravans?*" (257) When Vellya Paapen, Velutha's father, tells Mammachi about the affair, language fails him, and the narrative voice intervenes and tells what Velutha Paapen wants to tell Mammachi: "The story of a man and woman, standing together in the moonlight. Skin to skin" (255). After hearing the story, Mammachi spits on Vellya Paapen and calls him "Drunken dog! Drunken Paravan liar!" (256) Instead of feeling angry toward Mammachi's foul behavior, Vellya Paapen offers "to kill his son. To tear him limb from limb" (256) for transgressing the norms. The way these characters use language displays how they tend to curb or bypass sex. They use metaphors of untouchability to describe Ammu and Velutha's sexual transgression. Ammu's desire for the 'Untouchable' Velutha is rendered impure bordering on the scatological. Baby Kochamma and Mammachi show their revulsion by not addressing the subject of Ammu's affair with Velutha as if speaking amounts to touching 'it' and thus making oneself untouchable. In other instances, Ammu is called a "*veshya"* (8) and Velutha a "Paravan" (75). Roy uses Malayalam words because the English words would not have captured the sting these words carry in Malayalam.

These language-specific choices suggest the uncomfortable relationship between sex and local languages. Caste embedded in local languages regulates sex, keeping men and women bound to their socially assigned roles. Therefore, questions that seem to destabilize caste are met with violence, especially those that challenge the dominant sexual norms. The majority of brahminic narratives,[124] rather than dealing with sexual and caste violence, reject anti-caste questions as Western imports. Taking two convergent positions, they argue that sexuality was not a taboo subject in ancient India and that homosexuality is a Western vice that infected India. Through both these formulations the issue of non-normative sexualities is pushed out of brahminic discourse. The assertion that India has always been tolerant toward non-normative sexualities, and that its present-day ills are the legacies of British and Muslim rule, begins to crumble when one examines any epoch of Indian history through the perspective of caste. Indian queer theorists have made similar claims by referring to stories from the Vedic period and by emphasizing the centrality of rasas,[125] particularly the *sringara rasa* or erotic love, in the performing arts as they are theorized in texts like *Natyashastra* and *Kamasutra* (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 46-53; see chapter 13, "Make-up," in Menon 2018). In embracing and propagating coterminous narratives, scholars

[124] Even scholars such as Ruth Vanita, Saleem Kidwai, Devdutt Pattnaik, Madhavi Menon, and Gurcharan Das tend to view the Indian past as a utopian space with regard to sexual freedom, not considering that caste and sexual violence have always been an integral part of that past.

[125] See footnote 36

overlook some key patterns that are the hallmark of ancient Sanskrit texts. Although these texts depict sexuality, the participating figures are gods and goddesses. Not only are their diverse sexual unions transpire in a divine realm, they are supposed to be understood as *lila* or divine play.[126] These stories have no bearing on the actual lives of people because, in the real world, men and women live as Brahmins and Dalits. Yet they resonate so deeply with ordinary people because they provide respite from caste strictures. In Indian popular culture, Bombay films refashion these mythological stories to entertain the public (Booth 1995, 172). No matter how experimental or queer the plot may initially be, toward the end of the film, all conflicts resolve by reinstating heterosexuality. I argue that Indian mythology and Bombay films convince viewers not to question but surrender to caste, effectively encouraging masses to submit to caste norms.[127] Also, whereas Bollywood films focus on a range of themes such as nation-building, urban corruption, and heterosexual love and family, they shun issues that concern Dalits and sexual minorities. Even film scholars manage to discuss socio-cultural issues in selective and pro-brahminic ways, claiming Hindi films to be "an example of Indian secularism" (Deshpande 2007, 96).

The 2019 blockbuster film *Kabir Singh* provides a rich exploration of the interface between caste and the English language, as well as how caste, embedded in Hindu mythology, continues to modernize itself in present-day India. A 28-year-old alcoholic, misogynist surgeon, Kabir, falls in love with Preeti, a first-year medical student. Without exchanging a single word, he marks her as his. In one scene, he walks up to her and kisses her, an audacious act that seems to glorify misogyny. Preeti's attitude toward him is even more problematic because at no point does she question Kabir's outrageous behavior; rather, she falls in love with him. After deciding to marry, when Kabir visits Preeti's family, her father sees them in a compromising position and he asks Kabir to leave the house. The situation gets out of hand. Anger, spite, and accusation ensue, and Kabir's anger shifts from father to daughter, culminating with Kabir's departure from the house after saying hurtful things to Preeti. The audience learns that Preeti's parents have arranged her marriage to somebody else, and that she ties the knot without protest. Kabir's life goes into a downward spiral. Toward the end of the film, Kabir sees Preeti, now pregnant, walking in a park

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[126] The concepts of lila (divine play) and maya (illusion) are central to Hindu thought. Since 'Brahman' is the sole reality, the phenomenal world itself is viewed as lila and maya. In fact, all acts of Lord Rama, Krishna, and other gods are seen as their lila. The notion of Duniya (the real world) that Roy's hijra character refers to in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is similar to the general Hindu conception of the world as lila and maya. While these are broad philosophical concepts, in the context of everyday life, these formulations perpetuate brahminic order. Since everything is lila or maya, the socially constructed figures of Brahmins and Untouchables are seen as merely temporal. Together with ideas pertaining to karma, they perpetuate caste order as timeless, which works for upper castes, but not for outcasts.

[127] Kasturi Dadhe (2009, 9-20) demonstrates how contemporary Bollywood cinema promotes the Hindutva ideology, reinforcing patriarchal norms and thus caste.

with her mother-in-law. Kabir calls Preeti, but she ignores him. Since she does not respond, Kabir provokes her by saying that her marriage is a lie, and he continues to proclaim his love for her, prompting her to ask him about the child growing inside her. Kabir tells her that he will give the child his name.

As these unusual dialogues take place between Kabir and Preeti, there is pin-drop silence in the theater, filled with a primarily Indian audience. The scene is disorienting but also radical because the content of their negotiations takes a violent shift from what is considered normative or dharma in an Indian context. Kabir and Preeti casually dismiss the sacred bond of marriage. What the audience sees on the screen is fantastic, improbable, anti-caste: the scene's very unreality is its main force as it evokes a false sense of momentary freedom from caste strictures that govern the everyday lived reality of viewers. Before the audience can grasp, accept or reject the full dimension of Kabir and Preeti's unconventional talk, Preeti tells Kabir (and the audience) that the child in her belly is Kabir's, and that she never married anybody. Earlier after Kabir left her house following the argument, she told her parents about her pregnancy, and, as a consequence, she had to leave their house. Now the older woman, who was earlier presented as the mother-in-law, comes to corroborate Preeti's story and leaves the scene. While flirting and dwelling on the queer—by which I mean teasing the anti-caste imaginary—the film, in the end, with unexpected disclosure, resolutely reinstates caste norms. Kabir and Preeti, despite their flaws, emerge as the quintessential Rama-and-Sita-like figures who uphold dharma.

In a side plot to this saga of heterosexual love, the film deals with queerness literally. Throughout Kabir's difficult journey, Shiva, his male friend, takes care of him and emerges as the most committed person in Kabir's life.[128] Since Indian mythologies depict same-sex friendships strictly in a normative frame, the audience automatically understands these friendships as non-sexual, even though the film provides subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) hints about Shiva's sexuality, meant to humor the straight audience. In mythology as well as in popular cinema, the depiction of same-sex relationships never segues into the sacred domain of heterosexual marriage. The same happens in the film. Although the film flirts with the theme of gayness through Shiva's character, he is firmly kept in a friend's role. The narrative does not let him transition into a lover's role. Everyone is complicit in maintaining silence around Shiva's homosexuality: Kabir, Shiva's friends, his parents, and the audience. Also, in both mythology and mainstream movies, unlike the

[128] The *Natyashastra*, a Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts, emphasizes the practice of "namkaran," or naming, instructing that brahminic people should be given serious names, and non-brahminic people light names. In the film, the name Kabir recalls the 16-century Dalit poet Kabir, while Shiva recalls the idea of "ardhanareshvara," or half male and half female god, associated with Shiva. Though ultimately these characters subsume into the grand brahminic narrative that is both heterosexual and upper caste, Kabir and Shiva play nonnormative parts: Kabir in a caste sense, and Shiva in a sexual sense.

dominant heterosexual desire, the non-normative desire remains on the periphery. By acknowledging and addressing queer desire, the film not only diffuses its threatening force, it reinstates heterosexual desire as normative and sacred. Despite the excellent imaginative content of mythological stories or of a film like *Kabir Singh*, the narratives are divorced from everyday life. Their peculiar affective quality or narrative potency relays caste ideology but in disguise which ultimately helps sustain brahminic order. Even when queer stories are presented, they are shown as aberrations. Reasons are given for the queerness to privilege heterosexuality. Thus, even in the imaginative realm, the emphatic claim to diversity in sexual domains seems fraudulent when probed from the perspective of caste. The Indian past, like its present, emerges only as brahminic.

Examining 'Indian' texts from linguistic and caste perspectives affirms that anti-caste concepts are more readily expressed in the English language than in local languages because English is not restrained by caste ontology.[129] Therefore, modern Indian reformists rely on English to speak the language of human rights.[130] Addressing similar concerns in regional languages would be less effective. Brahminic languages constitute caste in ways that ensure caste cannot be fought against through their linguistic structures**.** Unlike regional languages, English provides a frame to pose anti-caste ideas. The queer movement in India is a good example. In addition to Indian queer activists who used English to address the issue of sexual rights, English language press played a significant role in highlighting queer issues in post-1980's India (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 207-215). An informed and openly queer person in India will switch to English while talking about sexuality, without realizing the linguistic transition. The native languages are so profoundly embedded in caste that they stifle any anti-caste expressions, including references to homosexuality.[131] In addition, expressing queer desire in local languages makes such expressions sound unnatural and even disdainful, evoking a feeling of revulsion in a caste sense, in both the

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[129] Dickens Leonard M. argues that to fight caste one needs to develop or adopt a language that does not recognize caste—in his words, "a caste-less language" (2017, 19-32).

[130] It is no coincidence that the most prominent shape-shifters of nineteenth- and twentieth-century India knew English well. A few examples are Aurobindo Ghosh, Swami Vivekanand, Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chand Vidya Sagar, Gandhi, Tagore, and Nehru. In pre-modern India, there had been reformers such as Kabir (1398-1440) and Nanak (1469-1539), but their work remained in the domain of religion. The concepts of equality and human rights, as we understand these terms today, came with modernity.

[131] In his memoir *A Dutiful Boy* (2020), Mohsin Zaidi, a British Muslim barrister of Pakistani descent, writes about his coming-of-age story focusing on religion and homosexuality in a way that embeds it in brahminic culture. Zaidi frequently differentiates between his struggles that are connected to Islam (faith) and those that are connected to the notion of *izzat* (culture). The latter dominates his memoir, putting it squarely in a brahminic cultural context that preceded Islam in the Indian subcontinent by centuries. When he decides to come out, he realizes that there is no way he could communicate his homosexuality to his family in his own language Hindi/Urdu. Frustrated with his inarticulation and crying, his mother asks him, "Are you gay?" (177). He says, "Yes!" (177). Despite being born in England, English speaking English, and residing in England, his culture in which caste is embedded, though in a mutated form, prevents his easy liberation.

speaker and the listener. In *The God of Small Things*, the contemptuous way Ammu's mother and aunt respond to Ammu's caste-transgressive but heterosexual desire suggests how they might have reacted if Ammu were in a lesbian relationship. It is no coincidence that post-global India needs an effective medium to articulate and embrace queer identities such as gay, lesbian, and queer. The English language has provided the required push to voice these so-called unIndian concepts,[132] which indicates how far modern India has come from its supposedly golden age of sexual freedom of brahminic antiquity.[133]

In *The God of Small Things*, unlike Malayalam that bolsters caste and thus encloses spaces, the English language opens new spaces to imagine life differently. When "restless," "feral" Ammu hears an English song on the radio, she disregards the constraints imposed on her by her family. The reader does not hear the lyrics, but the English song propels her to break free, and she walks "out of the [house] like a witch. To a better, happier place" (Roy [1997] 1998, 44). In contrast, at another point in the narrative, a Malayalam song is being played on the radio. Now, the lyrics of the song are revealed. The song is sad and depressive. It does not invite Ammu to take action. Instead, it makes her sink further into a state of helplessness. The Malayalam song reinstates caste norms because it functions as a disciplining tool, warning listeners about the futility of fighting caste norms and dreaming of a different world.

The liberating impact of the English language on Ammu is also seen in another context. When Ammu meets Margaret and a small cultural conflict ensues, Ammu fiercely defends her culture in English, a privilege completely inaccessible to Ammu's family servant, Kochu Maria. Also, as noted earlier, the English language empowers Ammu to see beyond caste, which allows her to seek out Velutha. Whereas the English language that has the potential to free them from caste constraints is not available to both, the language that is available to both—Malayalam—imposes silence on them. Eventually, they are literally silenced: Ammu is found dead in an obscure hotel room, and Velutha is unlawfully tortured to death in prison. In a different context, a more telling example of the working of the English language and sexuality surfaces in Rahel as she makes her "own inquiries into breasts" (16) and thus the female body. She could not have framed questions about "breasts" so lucidly in her native language. Although the oppressive convent, like the caste-governed Ayemenem village, is mute about breasts, the English language is not.

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[132] See *Because I Have a Voice* (2005) by Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan. The book is the first of its kind in India in which several young, urban, English-speaking Indians present their coming-out stories. The common thread among the diverse group of contributors, editors, and readers of the book is the English language.

[133] Contemporary Indian Scholars who focus on homosexuality tend to portray Indian past in utopian terms oblivious to caste aspects of it. See Ruth Vanita (2004; 2002b).

Another compelling illustration of the link between the English language, sexuality, and caste manifests itself in the film *My Brother Nikhil* (dir. Onir 2005) which focuses on the theme of AIDS. Nikhil, a young closeted gay sportsman, contracts AIDS. After intense introspection, when he comes out to his family and friends about his sexuality and disease, he faces extreme forms of revulsion, typically reserved for Untouchables. The stigma against homosexuality is such that activists address it via the language of public health education, as addressing it directly is bound to be unproductive because such interventions are seen as a threat to Indian culture and thus swiftly dismissed (Cohen 2009, 176-178). Despite challenges, Nikhil's coming-out narrative becomes possible because of his class, caste, and education. However, this does not make him immune from familial and societal abuse. His family eventually accepts him, but his struggle remains fraught with severe mental torture. Throughout the film, his family, nurses, doctors, neighbors, and clerks treat him as if he were an 'Untouchable.' The metaphoric language deployed against him is replete with caste subtexts, revealing the centrality of caste in everyday Indian life.

Within the context of the chapters discussed earlier in this thesis, the way the English language appears in Roy, Narayan, and even in Gandhi suggests its connection to non-normative sexuality. Like the young Gandhi who finds the English language thrilling and exciting because it allows him an escape from parental surveillance, Roy's Chacko and Narayan's Krishna take a similar refuge in English. While Chacko underlines paragraphs in quaint English texts which no other member of his family can decode, Krishna dreams of reading Milton and Shakespeare. Referring to an English book, the headmaster, Krishna's double, says, "This book, for instance, has helped me to reflect deeply and earnestly on the question of family, marriage, and other such institutions" (Narayan [1945] 1993, 146). Only the English texts, not the *Ramayana* or other Indian texts, seem to satisfy Rhodes scholar Chacko's and the English professor Krishna's needs. Whereas these upper-caste male characters show restraint in taking refuge in the English language, without disrupting the status quo, outcast characters or those who find themselves in subordinated positions explicitly embrace the English language as an antidote to overwhelmingly patriarchal culture, a pattern that recurs in the narratives of urban women, Dalits, and people who identify as queer.

4. English in High Places

The intersection of the English language with caste and sexuality in *The God of Small Things* has its precedence in British colonialism in India. Upper-caste characters use English as a means of distancing themselves from the non-English speaking characters, which recalls modern India's predominantly brahminic founding fathers who showed a similar tendency toward the English language. In nation-building narratives of pre-independence India, the English language, as

manifested in the novel, assumes various features of caste. Also, whereas debates surrounding the question of the English language may seem unconnected to sexuality, my contention is that they are inextricably linked. In this section, I will investigate the English-language politics of three national icons: M. K. Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, and show how their attitudes toward the colonizer's language have shaped and are shaped by caste. By examining Gandhi's, Tagore's, and Ambedkar's approaches toward English, I will address the caste dimensions of their politics and demonstrate how the English language and caste shape the very core of nation-building debates. Toward the end of my discussion, I will show how these debates are echoed in *The God of Small Things.* I will begin with the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, focusing on his attitude toward the English language and its intersection with caste.

Tagore, a towering authority in Bengal as well as in the rest of India, was the first non-European writer from the Indian subcontinent to win the Nobel prize for literature in 1931. Consequently, many Western readers wanted to read Tagore in the original. For some obscure reasons, Tagore himself translated his work into English, which proved to be a blunder, since Western critics deemed his English translation inferior, which, subsequently, marred his reputation in the west. Contemporary Indian critics, who use brahminic English, still criticize Tagore for his allegedly inferior English.[134] However, it seems that Tagore wanted to be known in the Western world as an author writing in English. Tagore scholar Sisir Das wrote, "An Indian writer, that is a writer who writes in an Indian language either by choice or accident, is fated to be unknown to the rest of the world irrespective of his literary accomplishments, unless he is translated into a 'major' language" (1994, 17). Das's use of the word "fate" suggests Tagore's urgent wish or need to break free from the confines of the Bengali language. As a writer aspiring to write in English, he emphasized the importance of the exchange of ideas between the East and the West. Whereas Tagore's views on exchange across cultures were important, he was mainly speaking for the Bengali *bhadralok* (upper-caste and civilized members of society). Bengali bhadraloks applaud Tagore for his consistently rigorous pro-brahminic acts even today. Amartya Sen, a Brahmin and a distinguished alumnus of Tagore's Shantiniketan, a school known for its progressive education, celebrates Tagore's internationalist reputation:

> [T]here was something remarkable about the ease with which discussion could move from Indian traditional literature to contemporary as well as classical Western thought and then to the culture of China or Japan or elsewhere. The school's celebration of variety was also in

[134] Girish Karnard and Khushwant Singh have criticized Tagore for his poor English translations.

> sharp contrast with the cultural conservatism and separatism that has tended to grip India from time to time. (Sen 2005, 115)

Sen offers a telling account of Tagore's wisdom. When everybody, in the heat of nationalism, was busy speaking the language of violence against the English and their language, Tagore showed openness to the outer world in word and deed. In India, Tagore's Shantiniketan has an excellent reputation as it has produced eminent Indians such as Indira Gandhi and Satyajit Ray. However, the much-touted cosmopolitanism of Tagore's school was brahminic to its core; its teachers, students, and all its distinguished Alumni were upper castes, including Sen.[135] In addition, Tagore's openness toward the world fitted his personal and communal interests. As an aspiring writer in English, an exchange of ideas between East and West was beneficial for him. As a concerned public figure, he also realized the importance of English in the spheres of modern science and technology for his people. In all these configurations, Dalits were absent.

Tagore had a complex relationship with the English language. As a writer, he struggled with it. In a letter dated February 4, 1918, Tagore wrote to the Irish writer, James H. Cousins:

> I have been told by some of my critics that my English is not modern and therefore it sounds strangely remote and inadequate […] I cannot judge my own performance in English. I am not even sure of my grammar, and I have no doubt that I make absurd mistakes in English which would be tragic in a university examination paper. Of course, I know that a mere absence of mistakes is not vital in literature, being aware that my own Bengali only too often is incorrect from the schoolmaster's point of view. Yet your language being foreign to me I cannot fully trust my instinct about the atmosphere of the words I use and I am still more uncertain whether my ideas assume their aspect of truth to an English reader of an average receptivity of mind. (Paul 2001, vol. 7, 312)

It is an odd reflection on his English language. Why did a writer of Tagore's stature decide to write in a language he did not fully understand? Also, being a proficient writer in Bengali, he should have been able to assess his English writing skills. Here, after acknowledging his problems with English grammar, he goes on to say the same thing about his mother tongue Bengali and thus negates his earlier assertion about his flawed English. He concludes the passage by putting the blame on the

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[135] K.C. Mukherjee (1970, 69–81) acknowledges the implicit Brahminism of Tagore educational philosophy in both theory and praxis, highlighting that Tagore modeled his school on those of the Vedic period. The article also presents Tagore less as an educationist but more like a saintly Brahmin.

"English reader of an average receptivity of mind" who might miss Tagore's nuanced writing. In another letter to Cousins, Tagore observed "I have to be careful as the [English] language is not mine own, but about ideas I think, it is best to have a definitely independent attitude of mind" (312). He acknowledges the foreignness of the English language while asserting that there is "something" in his writing that is supremely his own and that which is not tied to the English language—such as his brahminic identity. In another letter that Tagore wrote to fellow Bengali writer Ajit Chakravorty on May 12, 1913, he made no reference to his "inadequate" English which he frequently invoked when writing to his English friends:

> My English emerges out of my sub-conscious […] Once I mount the peak of conscious will all my wit and wisdom get muddled. That is why I cannot gird up my loins to do a translation. I can only set my boat adrift and not sit at the helm at all. Then, if and when I touch shore I cannot quite understand how it all happened. (Paul 2001, vol. 7: 313)

Tagore's Brahminism surfaces in his musings over the English language when he emphasizes his "independence of mind," equates his English with his mother tongue Bengali, and claims that English emerges out of his subconscious. Tagore's sentence, "I cannot quite understand how it all happened," concerning his English composition indicates his brahminic wish to disassociate the English language from its source, and brahminize it.

Returning to the question of his internationalism, Tagore's approach toward foreign languages, cultures, people, and ideas seems philanthropic, but it also carries traces of self-interest of a Bengali writer wanting to conquer other territories, and therefore, espousing self-serving ideologies. As noted earlier, Tagore advocated the use of the English language for the improvement of society, but it was not clear whether his society included Dalits. Also, at different stages in his life, he revolted against colonial injustice, but he did not fight the practice of untouchability with similar fervor. However, against colonialism, Tagore wrote:

> The civilization of ancient Greece was nurtured within the city walls. In fact, all the modern civilizations have their cradles of brick and mortar.
>
> These walls leave their mark deep in the minds of men. They set up a principle of 'divide and rule' in our mental outlook, which begets in us a habit of securing all our conquests by fortifying them and separating them from one another. We divide nation and nation, knowledge and knowledge, man and nature. It breeds in us a strong suspicion of

> whatever is beyond the barriers we have built, and everything that has to fight hard for entrance into our recognition. ([1913] 2021, 5)

Here Tagore's "we" suggests that he is writing as an internationalist. Underneath his careful cosmopolitanism is the critique of Western imperialism, indicated by words such as "they," "conquest," and "divide and rule." Tagore is justified in critiquing colonialism but, as a Brahmin, he is oblivious to the centuries-old subordination of Dalits. The language he uses to critique colonialism echoes Brahminism because words such as "walls," "barriers," "fortifying," "mental outlook," "separating," and "knowledge" are central to the Indian caste system.

M. K. Gandhi was the exact opposite of Tagore. Despite their different English language politics, both have strengthened Brahminism. After living and working in England and South Africa for more than two decades, Gandhi developed his own ideas to oust the British. In addition to practicing simplicity and *ahimsa* (non-violence) in everyday life, Gandhi advocated the use of native knowledge and vernacular languages to achieve *swaraj* (self-rule). He believed that the English language had harmed Indians. Commenting on two influential Indians Ram Mohan Roy (1872-1933) and Lokamanya Tilak (1856-1920), Gandhi wrote: They would have been far greater men if they had not had the contagion of learning English (1999, vol. 22: 462). On February 6, 1916 at Banaras Hindu University, when Gandhi was asked by the organizers to address a mixed Hindi and non-Hindi speaking audience in English, Gandhi said, "If you tell me that our languages are too poor to express the best thought, then I say that the sooner we are wiped out of our existence the better for us" (Gandhi 1994, 130). Through his anti-English politics, Gandhi rejected the Western model. Instead, he insisted on founding the Indian nation in the image of its villages, thus embedding in his vision for the country his concealed Brahminism.

Gandhi, who opposed the English language, mastered it. Edward Thompson, an Oxford Professor, commented: "I never met an Indian who had mastered the prepositions as Gandhi has. I learnt this during the Round Table Conference [...]. Mr. Gandhi would glance over my work, and would make just one suitable prepositional change—you might […] think the change was a trifle. But it did its work. […] it changed *my* meaning into Mr. Gandhi's meaning" (1939, 290-291). Whereas the first line of Thompson's comment seems condescending, the last line suggests his appreciation that extends from Gandhi's language to Gandhi, the man. In contrast, Tagore, a great proponent of the English language was criticized for writing second-rate English. On May 7, 1935, in a letter to his friend William Rothenstein, W. B. Yeats castigated Tagore: **"**[Tagore] thought it more important to know English than to be a great poet, he brought out sentimental rubbish and

wrecked his reputation. Tagore does not know English, no Indian knows English" (Yeats 1954, 834-35). E. M. Forster was milder than Yeats in his review of Tagore's *The Home and the World*:

> When a writer of Tagore's genius produces such a sentence as 'Passion is beautiful and pure—pure as the lily that comes out of the slimy soil; it rises superior to its defilement and needs no Pears' soap to wash it clean'—he raises some interesting questions. The sentence is not attractive—in fact it is a Babu sentence—and what does Tagore […] intend by it? […] [I]s it an experiment that has not quite come off? Probably an experiment, for throughout the book one is puzzled by bad tastes that verge upon bad taste. (1936, 330-331)

Probing Gandhi's and Tagore's contrasting positions on the use of the English language from a caste angle complicates their well-regarded lifelong humanitarian efforts. While Gandhi advocated what was necessary for him as a politician, Tagore propagated what he found significant for himself as an Indian writer in English. Whereas Gandhi's utopian village model was, as Ambedkar put it, "a veritable chamber of horrors" ([1979-2003], vol. 9: 296) for the Dalits, Tagore's cosmopolitanism ignored Dalits and indigenous people. Thus, Gandhi's and Tagore's opposing approaches toward English reveal the brahminic aspects of their politics. However, the humanitarian halos loom so large over Gandhi and Tagore in brahminic culture that one hesitates to question the ever-present Brahminism that informed their politics.

Unlike Tagore's and Gandhi's politics, Ambedkar's was anti-brahminic and pro-English. Being Dalit, Ambedkar regarded Gandhi not as a catalyst for change but as an agent for Brahminism. In his disagreement with brahminic politicians, including Gandhi, Ambedkar exposed the hypocrisy of upper-caste reformers as nobody else did in modern Indian history (Ambedkar [1936] 2014, 187-204). He asserted that Brahmins only wanted to use Dalits to free themselves from the British and that the independence from British rule would not end the brahminic colonization of Dalits. While Tagore and Gandhi circumvented caste, Ambedkar made it central to his life and politics. Ambedkar was convinced that Brahmins would never renounce caste because it was embedded in Hinduism. As a Dalit, he knew firsthand how profoundly caste pervaded native languages and became embedded in Gandhi's politics. At school, "Ambedkar was made to sit apart from his classmates, on a scrap of gunnysack, so that he would not pollute the classroom floor. He remained thirsty all day because he was not allowed to drink from the Touchables' tap" (Roy 2014, 95). Such visceral knowledge of caste made him seek salvation in modernity and the English language. Ambedkar scholar Eleanor Zelliot (1992) wrote in detail about how important modernity or modern institutions were to Ambedkar's politics.

As a consequence, Ambedkar, a great proponent of English, urged his fellow Dalits to learn English, like Dalit social reformers before him who saw English as an instrument of social emancipation. In a poem entitled "Mother English," the nineteenth-century educationist Savitri Phule wrote: "*In such a dismal time of ours / Come Mother English, this is your hour. / Throw off the yoke of redundant belief / Break open the door, walk out in relief*" (cited in Kolekar 2010, 259)[136] Mukatabai, a Dalit student of Savitri Phule, said provocatively of Hinduism: "Let that religion, where only one percent is privileged and the rest are deprived, perish from the earth and let it never enter our minds to be proud of such a religion" (1991, 214-215). Such intense Dalit hostility toward Hinduism and their worship of the English language are symptomatic of Dalit frustration with caste. Whereas Gandhi and Tagore were fighting colonialism, Ambedkar was combating Brahminism. Their different struggles were also reflected in their different approaches to the English language.

Being proficient in English, Ambedkar could challenge Gandhi and Brahminism, but also address Dalit concerns directly to the British without relying on brahminic mediation. Ambedkar's Cambridge law education and English skills shielded him from the relentless brahminic attempts, including Gandhi's, to silence him. In 1931, when Ambedkar met Gandhi for the first time, Gandhi did not know that Ambedkar was a Dalit since in Gandhi's estimation an English-speaking, Cambridge-educated lawyer could only be upper caste. Gandhi advised Ambedkar that instead of criticizing the Congress party he should join it and fight for his homeland: " 'Gandhiji, I have no Homeland,' was Ambedkar's famous reply. 'No Untouchable worth the name will be proud of this land' " (quoted in Roy 2014, 43). It was during this period that the brahminic reformers were rigorously seeking Dalit support[137] throughout the country to resist the British. Before collaborating with them, Ambedkar demanded that they first relinquish the caste system. As is perfectly clear from Ambedkar's politics, his motivations and goals were different from upper-caste freedom fighters. If they were fighting British rule, Ambedkar was fighting Brahminism which, of course, Gandhi and Gandhians fiercely resented.[138]

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[136] S. Anand (2010) describes the importance Dalits place on the English language because of its neutrality and its positive impact on their lives

[137] Brahminic communities seek to preserve and consolidate their power by sanskritizing Dalits and other non-brahminic people. Sanskritization is "a process whereby lower caste people were 'educated' in Hindu religious scriptures with the precise purpose of making them recognize the validity of the Hindu caste hierarchy, and co-opt caste politics into the Hindu fold" (Chaterjee 2016, 386-387). Ghar Wapsi, or coming home, and Love Jihad are militant versions of sanskritization.

[138] In his book *Worshipping False Gods,* Arun Shourie, a leading intellectual, declares Ambedkar to be a traitor, arguing that, unlike upper-caste reformers and thinkers (1997, ix), Ambedkar worked against Indian interests. Shourie persuasively argues that Ambedkar must not be "deified" (x). Not only does this very anti-Ambedkar polemic emerge as a pro-brahminic text, Ambedkar would have agreed with Shourie's assessment. Throughout, Shourie refers to Gandhi as "Gandhiji, " ji being an honorific suffix (12, 32, 43, 49,

Gandhi's, Tagore's, and Ambedkar's English language politics are not only tied to caste but also by extension resonated in their attitude toward sexuality. Gandhi advocated women's rights and wanted women to participate actively in the freedom struggle, but he expected women to be chaste. In Gandhi's *Ramarajya* (the kingdom of Lord Rama and thus a utopian space), men and women were expected to act like Rama and Sita**.** Also, although he asked women to join public life, he gave them jobs traditionally associated with their gender (Basu 1995, 95). Unlike Gandhi, Tagore seemed more open to the question of women's freedom. However, he depicted only upper-caste men and women, or Bengali *bhadralok*, in his work, upholding the world as brahminic with its caste hierarchies and norms firmly in place. His two best-known works *Geetanjali* (1912) and *The Home and the World* (1916) deal with the bhadralok. In *Geetanjali*, the central theme is devotional and thus ultra brahminic. *The Home and the World* addresses the issue of colonialism in a way that defines the book's central characters, its contexts, and its broader concerns as exclusively brahminic. Tagore's nuanced female character, Bimla, ultimately embraces the cultural script of what a "*bhadramahila*" should be: namely, surrendering to man's will for her own salvation, a key to sustaining brahminic order (see Mitra 1995, 256-258; Mukherjee 2017, 80-82).

Ambedkar spurned brahminic politics, particularly Gandhi's. He was fighting the caste system because he knew what it meant for Dalits. Therefore, unlike Tagore and Gandhi, his anti-caste stance was direct**.** Since he understood how caste is perpetuated and how it can be weakened, he pressed for women's equality by introducing The Hindu Code Bill in parliament in 1948, a year after Indian independence. He wanted to reform prevailing marriage systems by conferring on women and men equal rights in all legal matters (that had been denied by the *Manusmriti***)**. In Ambedkar's view, "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" ([1979-2003]1995: vol. 14 Part 1: 6). However, the brahminic castes successfully opposed the bill in parliament. Consequently, Ambedkar resigned from the post of Law Minister (6). His failure proved the legitimacy of his anti-brahminic politics, and it exposed the hypocrisy of upper-caste reformers concerning caste (Rege 2013, 40-42).

Some aspects of the caste and language politics of Tagore, Gandhi, and Ambedkar appear in *The God of Small Things.* The convoluted politics of Gandhi and Tagore resemble the attitudes of the upper-caste male characters: Rahel's uncle, Chacko; her grandfather, Pappachi; and more importantly, her great grandfather, Reverend Ipe, who had opened a school for Untouchables—they

58), but he never uses 'ji' with Ambedkar's name. Rather, he refers to Ambedkar as a "person like Ambedkar" (x), "he and his kind" (9).

all claim to be philanthropists. Despite their intragenerational humanitarian efforts, English seems to escape Dalits. In addition, like Gandhi and Tagore, these upper-caste characters appear to be progressive, but their caste sensibilities emerge full force when the status quo is threatened. Rahel's seemingly progressive uncle Chacko asks his sister Ammu to leave the house for having a sexual relationship with an 'Untouchable' man.

Just as the upper-caste characters share some key features of Gandhi and Tagore's politics, the novel's Dalit protagonist, Velutha, comes to mirror some aspects of Ambedkar's life. Despite their respective talents, both face massive hostility from the upper castes. A comparison between Velutha and Ambedkar might seem banal, but their situations are more similar than different as both are victimized by caste. Despite his best efforts, Ambedkar toward the end of his career failed to get the Hindu bill passed in the Indian parliament. Velutha was tortured to death for making love to an upper-caste woman. Velutha's failure to love and Ambedkar's incomplete fight for Dalit rights reveal the depth of Brahminism in India. It is odd how in different historical periods non-brahminic figures such as Velutha, Ambedkar, Karna, and even Eklavya emerge only to be silenced and contained by caste. It is equally intriguing to see that the English language takes features of caste in Roy's novel and in the lives of figures like Gandhi, Tagore, and Ambedkar. If the English language and caste were such linchpins in the lives of Gandhi, Tagore, and Ambedkar, it is easier to understand how language, caste, and sexuality influence the daily lives of ordinary people, and how these categories interact to institute Brahminism by excluding Dalits.

Through these three iconic Indians, I have shown India's complicated relationship with the English language and how invested it has been in caste politics. The myriad struggles surrounding the English language that governed colonial India continue to shape present-day India. Compared to seven decades ago, English is now widespread**,** and its influence is growing, but it is also emerging in a way that seamlessly aligns itself with caste hierarchies. In colonial India, caste influenced the course of the English language, whereas in contemporary India, caste governs the English language, and, conversely, the English language also governs caste.

5. The Unfinished Business of English

A cursory glance at contemporary India illustrates how significant English is to attain social success (Joseph 2011, paras. 3-4). From the 1990s onwards, with the proliferation of multinational companies and social media, the demand for English has grown manifold at every level. Consequently, young people are encouraged on a large scale to learn English to fulfill increased market demands, but this renewed focus on the English language has been mainly pragmatic rather than being aimed at bringing structural changes through educational reforms. Following the British

example, the Indian elite disseminates English for practical purposes. Like in colonial India, the policy-makers continue to regulate the English language use in postcolonial India. Those who want to study science and technology at all levels ranging from technicians to scientists are encouraged to learn English, but those who want to study Shakespeare or similar subjects in the humanities are not, because that will not bring jobs. The Sanskritist Monier Monier-Williams and A. P. Howell, along with others, "strenuously argued that only a practical or non-humanistic education could teach social or civic duty" (Viswanathan 1990, 143) and thus be useful to the British, but any training in self-scrutiny, namely, through the humanities, would take a "subversive role" (143):

> Those who are unsuccessful in gaining appointments will not turn to manual labour, but remain discontented members of society and enemies of our government, converting the little real education they have received into an instrument to injure us by talking treason and writing seditious articles in native journals. (Monier-Williams 1878, 161)

This British policy continued in independent India. The study of certain subjects in the humanities remains predominantly an upper-caste prerogative. Such brahminic politics concerning the language recall the pragmatic thrust of British policies in India. British politician and Chairman of East India Company Charles Grant (1746-1823) wrote, "The primary object of Great Britain, let it be acknowledged, was rather to discover what could be obtained from her Asiatic subjects, than how they could be benefited" (quoted in Viswanathan 1990, 26). In present-day India certain fields of education are mainly occupied by upper castes.

In other words, the British and brahminic elite were similarly inclined, both stressing the material aspect of the English language. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, an upper-caste Indian reformer, wanted Indians to learn English so that they could educate themselves in "Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy, and other useful sciences, which the natives of Europe have carried to a degree of perfection" (Roy 1901, 324). Since he understood the importance of English, he focused on the content of the instruction rather than the medium**.** He concluded that education in Sanskrit was not the answer. To him, Sanskrit was "so difficult that almost a lifetime is necessary for its acquisition" (Roy 1901, 325). These policies excluded the bulk of the population. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's ideas were similar to Macaulay's "Minute on Education" (Macaulay 1935, 349-350). Both were convinced that education in English would "improve" India. Whereas the British focused on strengthening their rule in India, upper-caste reformers wanted to entrench brahminic order.

Like the British before, the brahminic classes in contemporary India deploy the English language to regulate caste order and maintain caste hierarchies. A proficient English speaker is

automatically considered socially superior, whereas a non-English speaking person is marked as a social outcast. Therefore, despite the paucity of competent teachers, parents send their children to substandard English medium schools rather than to schools in which Hindi or another local language is used for instruction. This trend is prevalent in cities and in rural and semi-urban areas. Because of such compelling socio-cultural factors, young people are compelled to learn English, which has serious ramifications for them. Not only are they discouraged from reading and writing in their own language, they usually learn English from incompetent teachers. Consequently, most young urban Indians cannot use any language well, which implies that they cannot think well. Here is one typical example providing evidence of the decline of language skills among Indian youth:

> Kavita**,** Hope jaan u had taken decision? And jaan take risk but be carefull u dont get caught. Jaan i need exact date if not time when u will come to me. Jaan never take tension of mine m fine, u take care of urself. love you hamesha chuhiya pagal idiot. i need u hugg n kiss. come sweethrt. Rajesh. (Soofi 2011, para. 29)

To some extent, this way of writing might be a new phenomenon, and symptomatic of the digital age, but it does not fully explain widespread poor communication skills. Delhi University professor Rupleena Bose notes that "today everyone is in a hurry, so every word has to be connected to productivity. There is a substitute for every emotional expression of silence; smiley, hugs […]" (quoted in Soofi 2011, para 31). Bose convincingly connects the decline in language skills to the digital age but without addressing the effect of pre-existing structural inequalities resulting from caste. In a brahminic context, only Brahmins should aspire to acquire knowledge, which implies following caste nomenclature and duties assigned therein by all so that caste order can be sustained**.** The implication is that caste transgressions, including linguistic ones, will lead to chaos. Therefore, despite India being a democracy, caste governs India. This is apparent when one compares those who hold high-profile positions in the private sector, law, education, and medicine to those who do manual scavenging and sanitary-related work in India (see Singh 1990a). Commenting on contemporary India, Arundhati Roy remarked that the Indian middle- and upper-middle classes have formed a country of their own, effectively having seceded from the rest of the Indian population (Roy 2016, 96). English seems to have played a pivotal role in driving this "secession" (96). The English-speaking elite not only live in their own country like foreigners but they also despise non-English-speaking others.

Attitudes derived from caste and the English language appear in intricate ways in Indian-English fiction. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy uses brahminic English, which is similar to

Ammu and Ammu's children's English. But Roy's English is not Pappachi's 'proper' English. Only through brahminic English does she break the familiar patterns of the language, creating new meanings with old words. Roy shares this affinity with other contemporary brahminic writers such as Amitav Ghosh and Vikram Seth who experiment with English and succeed in capturing Indian reality in a way that eluded first-generation Indian writers such as R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raj Rao. While (brahminic) Indian writers in English are often attacked by indigenous writers, sometimes such critiques segue into unexpected areas. Writing about Indian writers in English, Naipaul posited that India has no independent intellectual life. According to him, nowhere else in the world does a nation write its most important literature in a foreign language; nowhere else is a country's own literature judged, read, and published outside its borders (Naipaul 2007, 192).

Naipaul's critique is insightful, but as English, aided by globalization, is spreading in India, new trends in the Indian writings in English are making Naipaul's critique look dated. These new writings are read, judged, and consumed by the Indian audience (Trivedi 2016, 403-404). Chetan Bhagat is the face of this new trend in Indian writings in English. Bhagat's writing is dubbed as "trash" by brahminic writers in English, who allege that Bhagat exploits the market by dispensing third-rate books.[139] But Bhagat's supporters claim that he is the only writer whose books cater to the needs of the urban, middle-class, semi-literate, and upper-caste youth in matters such as education, employment, and desire. Unlike other brahminic writers, Bhagat has filled the space that globalization and the expansion of the English language have created in India. The accusations hurled at Bhagat by well-known brahminic English writers mirror how the same writers are denounced by regional writers for exoticizing India for Western consumption. Bhagat's success story might seem like a virtue to Naipaul, but Bhagat's success has its pitfall because his work, with its strong local appeal, has the potential to reinforce Brahminism **(**Rao 2018, 107).

These various manifestations of brahminic English fiction emerge contrarily in Dalit writings. Unlike brahminic writers, Dalit writers insist on using 'proper' English and consciously distance themselves from brahminic English. They do not want their work to be negatively judged only because they are Dalits and came to English later than their upper-caste counterparts. Like brahminic writers, Dalit writers write in English for a wider readership. They also write in English for another reason. Since upper-caste writers dominate regional literatures, both literally and ideologically, Dalit writers find it difficult to launch themselves. In 2015, Perumal Murugan, a non-Dalit, wrote an allegedly anti-caste book in Tamil. The incensed local upper-caste communities

[139] Chetan Bhagat, despite his phenomenal success, has been criticized and mocked by the brahminic elite, including writers such as Salman Rushdie and Aatish Taseer. Commenting on elitism in literature, Bhagat says that a certain section of Indian society has "a kind of colonial hangover" about the English language (Suman, 2018, para. 4).

turned so threatening that, through a Facebook post, Murugan announced: "Perumal Murugan, the writer is dead. As he is no God, he is not going to resurrect himself. He has no faith in rebirth. As an ordinary teacher, he will live as P. Murugan. Leave him alone" (quoted in Biswas 2015, para. 1). This extreme brahminic reaction against Murugan's book indicates that only pro-brahminic literature can be written in Tamil. Murugan's case also raises the question that if a non-Dalit writer can be bullied, what would have happened to a Dalit writer under similar circumstances?

These battles concerning the English language in the field of Indian literature are symptomatic of India's larger contemporary realities. English language politics impacts not only the non-English-speaking brahminic elite or non-elite brahminic groups but also the masses, irrespective of their caste status. When capitalism is added to caste, it produces a situation in India in which a very tiny class holds everything, leaving the majority of the population doubly impoverished. *The God of Small Things* features this rampant caste and class tension when the Ipe family members encounter a marching crowd and Estha is abused in Kottayam city (see chapter V, 157-159). However, the intensity and extent of such tensions emerge in their full horror in Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, which I will discuss in the next chapter. Since millions of people have been affected by the wrongful policies of the brahminic elite, they tend toward right-wing populism. The right-wing politicians, in addition to invoking usual nationalist tropes, deploy anti-English language politics to mobilize the masses, exploiting public anger for their own gain. "When Modi[140] will come to power, we will send the government of the English packing," an infuriated man told the author Aatish Taseer (2015, para. 1). Tapping this incipient anger of the masses against the English-speaking ruling class, the right seeks to discredit the English language. Mulayam Singh Yadav, an ex-minister, once said in a speech that he wanted to eradicate English from India's linguistic map. He said, "We've had enough leaders who ask for votes in their mother tongues but spend their parliamentary tenures speaking in English" (Kinzer 1998, para. 4). By framing the English language as anti-national, conservative politicians incite anti-English language sentiments and disdain for the English-speaking elite. In recent years, with the rise of Hindu cultural nationalism, those from the elite who speak 'proper'—as opposed to brahminic—English are mocked in popular culture.

In Roy's novel, 'proper' and 'brahminic' English are framed differently, indicating different things. Whereas speakers of 'proper' English like Pappachi and Chacko are shown as being closer to the missionaries and the Syrian Christian Church but alienated from their own cultural moorings, Rahel and Estha's English is brahminized to the extent that it has become an Indian language. Unlike Pappachi's, Chacko's, and Baby Kochamma's 'proper' English, Rahel's, Estha's, and

[140] Narendra Modi is a right-wing Hindu nationalist politician and the current Prime Minister of India.

Ammu's English has taken an Indian—even pre-English—aspect, by which I mean it does not idolize British English. It has merged into brahminic India. At one point, as children Estha and Rahel are seen in the village church, attending their cousin Sophie Mol's funeral, but as adults, they go to the village temple and watch the Hindu Epic, the *Mahabharata*,[141] which underscores the resilience of Brahminism that runs underneath Christianity and the English language. A similar point is made through Father Mulligan, a staunch Christian, who studies "Hindu scriptures" in order to proselytize the local population, but instead ends up himself embracing Hinduism (Roy [1997] 1998, 297). The English language's unique development as brahminic English as it unfolds in *The God of Small Things* and more visibly in everyday life in present-day India finds an enthusiastic acceptance and expression in Jaithirth Rao (2005), the head of a major Indian information technology firm. He claims that English has not only played a major role in the making of modern India, it has an even greater role to play in the future and rather provocatively adds that "Macaulay is central to modern India" (para. 2). He dismisses criticism that English has "deracinated" or hybridized Indians (para. 8). He refers to himself and many other English-speaking intellectuals and writers as "proud Macaulay-putras" (para. 9). Rao's words suggest that the brahminized English is an Indian language, and that by brahminizing English, upper castes seek to deflect linguistic colonization on the one hand and to strengthen caste-order on the other.

In today's India, despite resistance and developments of all kinds around the English language, its use indicates upward mobility. However, there is also a rising contempt for the English-speaking elite because the spread of English has stripped away the halo of selectivity surrounding its use. English has lost some of its sheen and power now that it is used by a vast number of people in India. Nevertheless, its social position remains mostly the same. Like caste, the dominance of the English language may appear at times to be on the decline, but in actuality its hold on Indian society and its brahminic culture remains undiminished.

[141] In Roy's *The God of Small Things*, chapter 12, "Kochu Thomban," is devoted to Rahel and Estha's visit to the Hindu temple ([1997] 1998, 228-237).e

VII
Outcasts in Twenty-first Century India: Graveyard, and Mehfils in Graveyard

Graveyards, both literal and metaphorical, appear in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). In the brahminic imagination, the graveyard is perceived as a negative space, both anomalous and illegible, and it is consequently assigned a caste dimension, akin to the practice of untouchability. Since Hindus, unlike Muslims, cremate rather than bury their dead, they shun graveyards and areas surrounding them. However, this dominant loathing for the graveyard in brahminic culture works in an unexpected way when one of the novel's central *hijra* (intersex) characters, Anjum, is compelled to live in a graveyard. Afterward, other outcast characters join her. In addition to Anjum's graveyard, metaphoric graveyards appear in three significant spaces: home, city, and nation, each constructed as brahminic, based on the exclusion of non- and anti-brahminic people. I focus primarily on hijras, Dalits, and tawaifs (courtesans)[142] to examine how present-day brahminic discourse, whose impact is felt in all private and public spaces, engages with them.

The lives of Roy's outcast characters intersect when they come to live with Anjum in a city graveyard. Whereas cities like Delhi exclude the majority of the populace from the built environment both through urban design and civic policies, the pastoral regions of central India and the Kashmir valley surface as sites of open graveyards with insurgencies and civil unrest in Roy's novel. Within urban spaces, the middle and upper-middle classes avoid urban slums and their inhabitants, pushing them into spaces where they cannot be seen. However, such distancing causes its own pathology in the ruling class as it produces fears, anxieties, and even guilt in its members. Surrounded, haunted, and threatened by dystopian forces, the elite constantly devises ways to protect themselves**,** enclosing their neighborhoods into "gated housing communities" (Roy 2017, 74), using tinted glasses in their cars, seeking peace in religious discourse or cures or easy death in

[142] Tawaifs are perceived as prostitutes in mainstream culture, but many tawaif historians strongly disagree (Kidwai 2004; Vanita 2017; Oldenburg 1990). They describe them as performing artists, without disputing their stigmatization and treatment as outcasts. In Sanskrit texts, they have been referred to as *ganikas. Kamasutra* devotes one whole chapter to courtesans, but without proscribing them in any way. Ruth Vanita writes, "The section on courtesans in the *Kamasutra* purports to be a reproduction of a work by Dattaka, which he composed with the aid of a famous courtesan" (2001, 46).

luxury hospices and hospitals. Unlike graveyards, spaces such as hospices and hospitals make death invisible by pushing it out of everyday life. When the members of Anjum's graveyard commune, which she calls "Jannat [Paradise**]** Guest House" (68), go on a drive, they see two worlds: one above the flyover that is organized and privileged, and the other underneath it that is dark and marginalized. Whereas, in popular discourse, such stark inequalities are seen as the outcome of neo-liberal excess, I stress the role that caste plays in the creation of the "precariat."[143]

While outcasts exist in some form in all societies, the Indian caste system is unique in how it legitimizes and handles its outcasts without giving up the caste structure. Except for Dalits, all other outcast figures such as hijras, tawaifs, and ascetics may seem unconnected to the caste system**.** I will demonstrate how these outcast identities are intimately linked to the caste system, arguing that they are the byproducts of caste. Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* deals with Dalits, transgressive women, tribals, sexual and religious minorities; even the environment appears like an outcast figure in the novel, ruined and exploited by brahminic and neocolonial excess.[144] Unlike mainstream Indian writers in English who have avoided writing about hijras and Dalits, Arundhati Roy's fiction engages with them. In her debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), Roy addressed the issue of caste, and in her recent novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), she takes the reader further by placing not only Dalit but also hijra characters at the heart of the story.

Unlike Narayan's *The English Teacher* and Roy's *The God of Small Things* that reveal the complex working of brahminic homes, Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has no such homes to show. Rather, the novel tells a "shattered story" (416) of individuals who are either homeless or

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[143] The concept of precarity, especially in the Indian context, is mainly seen as the outcome of global capitalism in Third-World spaces. Whereas neoliberal policies do render a vast populace vulnerable, these vulnerabilities are not only connected to neoliberalism. Traditional forms of socio-economic organization such as the caste system play a significant role in further aggravating the pre-existing precariat. If poverty is violence, then poverty in India is connected to the epistemology of caste violence. Without directly addressing the issue of caste, Annie Zaidi's *Bread, Cement, Cactus: A Memoir of Belonging and Dislocation* (2020) and Kavitha Iyer's *Landscapes of Loss: The Story of an Indian Drought* (2021) show in detail how inequalities in rural and urban India are reproduced. Zaidi narrates the story of the industrial town she grew up in and highlights how brahminic structures assert themselves on the non-brahminic population, destroying their languages, cultures, and even their habitats. Iyer's portrayal of drought in Maharashtra demonstrates that while droughts are natural to some extent, the way they are managed is not—farmer suicides, mass migrations toward cities, and deaths because of starvation are the outcome of indifference, incompetence, and greed of the policy-makers. Both narratives, though they deal with particular regions, demonstrate how agrarian unrest, poverty, and disease in India are connected to structural inequalities and thus caste. Also see Kumar (1965)

[144] Roy engages with the question of brahminic hegemony by referring to the 1984 Sikh Riots, the 2002 Gujarat Riots, the Kashmir conflict, and Dalit and tribal unrest in the novel. She holds global capitalism responsible for urban poverty, environmental degradation, and the forced displacement of millions of people. The 1984 Union Carbide Bhopal gas leak and the company's American CEO Warren Anderson's insensitive response to it are cited as examples of U.S. capitalism and its policies. See Roy (2012, 2010, 2002b).

rendered homeless, thus living precarious lives. The emergence of graveyards, both real and metaphorical, underscores the brahminic violence against the social outcasts Roy refers to as "The Unconsoled," to whom the novel is dedicated. Within this constellation of brahminic violence that exiles Roy's outcast characters to the graveyard, the novel demonstrates how graveyards can emerge as a nourishing space. On the surface, the novel engages with violence, death, dying, graveyards, and thus with the overarching brahminic dominance, but it also shows how such dominance can never be complete and that it can always be resisted.

Focusing on Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost of Happiness* in conjunction with some of her essays and with her first novel *The God of Small Things*, I will examine how brahminic narratives surrounding home, society, and nation produce outcasts to strengthen caste. In the second half of this chapter, by shifting focus from a brahminic to a non-brahminic perspective, I will focus on the lives of Roy's outcast characters such as Dalits, queers, hijras, and tawaifs and demonstrate how this focal shift highlights an alternative reality in which *mehfils* (gatherings) emerge as life-nourishing spaces in non-brahminic spaces such as the graveyard, contrary to how brahminic discourse perceives non-brahminic people and non-brahminic spaces. Examining Roy's novel along with the brief reading of hijra narratives, Khushwant Singh's novel, *Delhi* (1990b), and some key Hindu philosophical ideas such as daan, karma, and the body in relation to caste, I will discuss in the first section of this chapter how family, upper-caste community, and nation are complicit in the formation and suppression of outcast figures. I will then look at outcast subcultures from a non-brahminic perspective.

1. Graveyards for the living: Outcasts in Home and City spaces

In a highly religious and ritual-based brahminic culture, caste practices begin with that small and yet powerful unit called family. As soon as a baby is born, its sex determines how others will receive it. Indian families in general, and brahminic families in particular, celebrate the birth of a male child by performing elaborate rituals and ceremonies, but for a female child, their response is unwelcoming[145] (India 2018; Westley and Choe 2007, 2-5), and if the child is of indeterminate sex, most parents seek to abandon or even eliminate the intersex child (Singh 1990b, 29; Singh and Madurai 2020, paras. 7-12). The first half of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* depicts the arrival of a newborn intersex child in a Muslim family, and the family's complicated response to it, highlighting the covert strength of caste on its practitioners. The mother, Jahanara Begum, hides her

[145] The depreciation of the female child started early in Indian history (see Shastri 1960, 4-5). The *Rig Veda*, the oldest and the most respected of the four Vedas, contains prayer hymns only for the birth of sons, but not for girls. However later Vedas and other texts contain prayers and rituals for the specific purpose of preventing the birth of a girl child in favor of male progeny.

child's intersex status from her neighbors but also from her husband. She feels frightened because nothing in her immediate environment can mitigate her fears when faced with the body of her intersex child. She is terrified to discover the "nestling underneath his boy-parts, a small, unformed, but undoubtedly girl-part" (Roy 2017, 7). Through the use of the word "nestling," Roy draws attention to how non-normative bodies are perceived. The "nestling underneath" of the child's body puts the child in a non-human world. Nestling is what a bird does in nature, but Jahanara Begum has detected something unnatural: a hijra. She contemplates killing herself and her child because the world ceases to make sense to her. Consistent with the grammar of the Urdu language that she speaks, everything in her world has a gender:

> In Urdu, the only language she knew, all things, not just living things but *all* things—carpets,clothes, books, pens, musical instruments had a gender. Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby. Yes of course she knew there was a word for those like him—*Hijra.* Two words actually, *Hijra* and *Kinner*. But two words do not make a language. (8)

Jahanara Begum comes to inhabit and encounter a negative social space; the child is real but the Urdu language negates its bodily reality. The narrative voice renders her inner struggle thus: "Was it possible to live outside language? Naturally this question did not address itself to her in words, or as a single lucid sentence. It addressed itself to her as a soundless, embryonic howl" (8) that voices her rage and sudden alienation. Since everything around her is so overwhelmingly codified by caste norms that demand every child be either male or female, and since her child is neither, Jahanara Begum's "howl" (8) on seeing her child's intersex body is an expression of the child's social death.

Even though hijras hardly figure in Jahanara Begum's life, after she gives birth to one, they become "the most important people in the world" (9). Hoping that her infant's female part will either heal or fade, she calls the child, Aftab,[146] raises him as a boy, and hides the child's gender ambiguity from everyone, including her husband. She manages to defer Aftab's circumcision ceremony for a few years, but when she cannot invent more excuses for Aftab and tells her husband, Mulaqat Ali, about Aftab's hijra body, Mulaqat Ali, who has a couplet ready "for every illness, every occasion, every mood" (15), is speechless at this revelation. Jahanara Begum's suicidal thoughts and Mulaqat Ali's silent rage show how the caste notion of *izzat* (honor) shapes

[146] Throughout this chapter, I use Jahanar Begum's intersex child male name, Aftab, and male pronoun for everything that occurs in his life prior to his joining the hijra community. I use her female name, Anjum, and female pronoun for everything that occurs after she joins the hijra community and becomes a hijra.

parents of intersex children. Although both parents do their best as long as Aftab lives with and listens to them, they reveal their prejudice once he leaves home and joins the hijra community. While Anjum's (Aftab's) mother meets her only in public places, her father ignores her everywhere. Since most Indian marriages are arranged and since people ostracize a family in which an intersex infant is born because they fear that intersex children will be the outcome of such unions, Anjum's parents distance themselves from her to safeguard the interests of their other children.

However, as long as Aftab lives at home, Jahanara Begum feels obliged to protect her child from others, including the hijra community. Culturally, hijras bless newborn babies, but if a child is intersex, they insist on adopting it (Nanda 1999, 5). Although Jahanara Begum manages to escape the scrutiny of hijras and raises her child as a boy, she bears a great psychological burden. When she tells her husband about Aftab, he tries to fix Aftab's unruly body through hakims and maulivis, but Jahanara Begum's prayers and Mulaqat Ali's efforts to straighten their son go in vain. Aftab develops pronounced feminine traits as he matures. His body "suddenly beg[ins] to wage a war on him" (Roy 2017, 23-24). More than any other bodily change, he hates his changed voice the most: "A deep, powerful man's voice in place of his sweet, high voice" (24). At school, boys make taunting rhymes to ridicule him: "He's a She. He's not a He or a She. He's a He and a She. She-He, He-She Hee! Hee! Hee!" (12) presenting him with his first traumatic encounter with the external world beyond the contained space of the home. Consequently, he stops going to school. As Aftab grows up, he realizes he has no role to play in his biological family. He leaves home to join the hijra community, which seems like a voluntary act, but he has no other option. Implicitly, his family resents his hijra fitrat, or "tendencies" (17). Aftab's hijra tendencies render him irrelevant to his family because, as a hijra, he cannot participate in caste rituals related to living, marrying, dying, and thus life. Despite Jahanara Begum's best efforts, her son is made into a sexual outcast.

While hijras face unusual social hostility, they are rarely narrated or shown positively in popular discourse.[147] Only in recent years have hijras shared stories of humiliation and violence perpetrated by their own families. One hijra describes how her family forbids her to participate in her father's funeral thus: "When my father died I didn't go to bury him. If I had gone there, the relatives and others would not have [taken] part in the burial. The Imam would not conduct the janaza (religious rite). … my relatives told me, 'you are wearing gold like women, you should not touch your father's dead body.'" (Khan et al., 2009, 445) This is one way in which a family, and by implication the caste community, rejects a hijra's right to grieve and touch the dead body of her own

[147] Despite being a huge industry, Indian films are rarely centered on Dalits and hijras. Occasionally when hijras are shown, these depictions reinforce, and increase, already existing hijra stereotypes.

father, thus turning her into an 'Untouchable.' Since everyday life is steeped in gendered rituals, hijras are forbidden to participate in them because of their assumed bodily impurity.

Brahminic obsession with caste purity is connected to the home space[148] where all caste rituals are observed, and therefore this space is resolutely guarded. People are first and foremost tied to the home space—that is, to their caste identities and caste affiliations or what Rana Dasgupta calls "clannish allegiances" (2014, 16) that override every other identity marker based on gender, language, region, and even nation. Referring to such dynamics of caste, Ambedkar trenchantly observed, "The whole morality is as bad as tribal morality My caste-man, right or wrong; my caste-man, good or bad. It is not a case of standing by or not standing by caste. Have not Hindus committed treason against their country in the interests of their caste?" ([1936] 2014, 259) Every local or national issue is judged depending upon how it relates to one's caste interests. Therefore, violence against hijras in public seldom evokes anger or introspection because they do not belong to conventional families, nor do they have families of their own. However, this collective indifference is not restricted to hijra bodies but extended toward all those who are perceived as outcasts. With respect to intersex babies, most parents either give them to the hijra community at birth, or raise them with such hostility that these children run away from home when they grow up (Mondal 2020, 171). We see this pattern explicitly emerging in Mulaqat Ali's behavior toward Anjum. A family's obsession with caste purity that makes it reject nonnormative children culminates in a collective institutional indifference as hijras move from home space to public space. In what follows, I discuss how caste assumes more damaging aspects for hijras when they appear in public spaces.

The moment hijras appear in public spaces they invite hostile attention loaded with latent undercurrents of violence, connected to their sexual illegibility and their exaggerated manners for which they are mocked, harassed, and assaulted (Butalia 2012, 4-5). Wrapped in caste and bodily certainty, their tormentors unleash a strange civic-minded cruelty against hijras, uploading their own anxieties and fears, as though hijras are public dumpsites. Social antipathy closes off hijra communities into self-imposed shielded enclosures that grant them some protection but also augments their opacity to the larger public, harming their image as all kinds of stereotypes about them congeal in social discourse. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, when Anjum, alienated from her biological family and the hijra community, is compelled to live in a graveyard, she is harassed for no apparent reason:

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[148] Referring to the significance of the home space in a brahminic context, Gopal Guru (2009, 55) asserts that while upper-caste subjects become co-workers, teachers, citizens, and consumers in the public domain, they shed these universal identities and become "completely denuded in the domestic" sphere that allows a space for "conducting purificatory functions" in a caste sense.

> When she first moved in, she endured months of casual cruelty like a tree would—without flinching. She didn't turn to see which small boy had thrown a stone at her, didn't crane her neck to read the insults scratched into her bark. When people called her names—clown without a circus, queen without a palace—she let the hurt blow through her branches like a breeze and used the music of her rustling leaves as balm to ease the pain. (Roy 2017, 3)

What seems like casual harassment by children is a reflection of an all-pervasive anti-hijra enmity, rooted in caste. In brahminical culture**,** people resent the figure of the hijra as it is the antithesis of the suitable boy or Lord Rama, "the role model of the perfect human being" (Varma 2020, ix). Children's taunts are merely a milder version of Jahanara Begum's "embryonic howl" and of Mulaqat Ali's rejection when faced with the hijra body. Both are manifestations of brahminic culture that rejects ideas and bodies which do not fit its framework.

In recent years, several hijra narratives have shown how ordinary men and state officials (i.e, policemen, lawyers, doctors**)** treat them. Despite having legal rights, precarity governs hijras' everyday lives. One hijra describes his work experience in a city space thus: "I have worked in a garment factory for about a year. I could not even go to the toilet …. Once my supervisor forced me to have sex with him, and I had no choice but to do it. But when it became public, my job was dismissed, as if it was my fault" (Khan, et.al, 2009, 445). This hijra's testimony leads one to the assumption that he goes to work in normal attire and that he is not yet associated with the hijra community because usually hijras are not employed by establishments in either the private or public sectors. Here, we see how a workplace turns criminally against a hijra person. The widespread assumption that no one will listen to hijra grievances substantially increases violence against them. As Roopsie, a hijra, says, "In [critical] situations [...], I don't ever go to the police anymore, because the one time I did, the police only taunted me more and said that such things are bound to happen in my dirty profession" (Majumdar 2016, 58). In her autobiography, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010), A. Revathi provides a chilling account of her life experiences in urban Indian cities where police and ordinary people abused her because she is a hijra (Revathi 2010, 206-208).

The casual violence that Anjum suffers at the hands of children is a representative version of what happens to hijras in the adult world where they become soft targets for harassment, extortion, and sexual violence from various actors and where they encounter anti-hijra hostility, akin to the practice of untouchability—an everyday feature of hijra lives that Aarti's testimony corroborates: "If by chance**,** we touch someone … they say 'how dare you touch us, stand at a distance and then speak.' … they ridicule us and treat us like untouchables" (Majumdar 2016, 53). Such a visceral

revulsion toward hijras' "touch" comes easily to upper castes who have been practicing untouchability for centuries (Khatri 2017, 402-403).

Although outcasts such as hijras and Dalits face discrimination, they suffer its consequences differently. In both rural and urban places Dalits encounter brahminic violence (Gettleman and Raj 2018; Pankaj 2022). While Dalits in rural areas have several restrictions imposed on them by upper castes (Roy 2014, 24; Thorat 2002, 578), they have greater access to public spaces in cities. Unlike in a rural village, one cannot easily distinguish Dalits from non-Dalits in a city. In the novel, as long as the Dalit character Dayachand lives in his village he is a Dalit, but in a city he assumes a Muslim identity and calls himself Saddam Hussain, a transformation that would have been impossible in his home village. However, the access of hijras—who are much more readily identifiable—to public places is not only limited but also policed. In recent years, while hijras have been given legal rights, this has little practical bearing on their everyday life. Lakshmi, a Mumbai-based hijra, derides brahminic reforms purportedly intended to help hijras: "As hijras we live ordinary lives, like everyone else. Like the underdog, we are respected by nobody. Except for the newly introduced 'Aadhar Card' we have no 'aadhar' or official recognition, or support from any quarter whatsoever. We are thus destitute. Estranged from family and ostracized by society …" (Raode 2013, para. 2). Unlike others in her community, Lakshmi is an educated, English-speaking, and privileged hijra. When she speaks against social norms and state institutions, she is speaking as a powerful hijra-activist on behalf of the hijra community. Criticizing the progressive Rights of Transgender Persons Bills of 2014, 2015, 2016 (see Saria 2019, 137-143), which are aimed at ending anti-hijra discrimination by recognizing hijras as the third gender, she argues that nothing has changed on the ground. This is because certifying hijras as citizens but not recognizing them as a socially disadvantaged group, and expecting them to be model citizens by giving up hijra lifestyles but not giving them protection in education or employment, is duplicitous. Before this law was enforced, hijras could not open a bank account or obtain a passport, and now with the law in their favor, they still face prejudice while dealing with civic institutions. Lakshmi addresses hijra issues in a way that suggests her privilege because, compared to her balanced articulation of hijra issues, they emerge differently in regular hijra narratives that emphasize the everyday brutalities hijras face, such as in A. Revathi's autobiography.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness features instances where, instead of affording protection, state officials threaten Anjum for living in the graveyard:

> Every few months the municipal authorities stuck a notice on Anjum's front door that said squatters were strictly prohibited from living in the graveyard and that any

> authorized construction would be demolished within a week. She told them that she wasn't living in the graveyard, she was dying in it—and for this she didn't need permission from the municipality because she had authorization from the Almighty Himself. (Roy 2017, 67)

Instead of rehabilitating marginalized people like Anjum, state officials visit the graveyard to harass Anjum. Elsewhere in the novel, commenting on government officials, Naga, an intelligence officer, says, "Most of them [bureaucrats] are conservative, closet Brahmins who wear their sacred threads inside their safari suits […]. They tolerate me only because I am a fellow Twice-born [upper-caste]" (165). Except for state officials, nobody else troubles Anjum in the graveyard—"no djinns arrived to make her acquaintance, no ghosts threatened a haunting" (61). Rather, the desolation of the graveyard protects her. When Anjum and other hijras gather at a wedding party in a well-to-do Delhi neighborhood, they are asked to leave. The policemen start kicking them "as though they were circus clowns and instructed to scram, to run all the way home if they did not want to be arrested for prostitution and obscenity" (35). The narrative voice adds that such violence is "only a routine bit of humiliation for Hijras, nothing out of the ordinary" (35).

Incidents of brahminic violence and a pervasive societal hostility against hijras unleash self-doubt and self-hatred in hijras. One hijar states, "The police were very nice: they beat me only once" (quoted in Narrain 2004, 150). Obliquely, Anjum shows similar traits. Once when she sees an abandoned girl child in a crowded place, she not only informs the police but sits with the child the whole day, hoping that someone will come looking for the child. All this excessive caution underscores her deep awareness about how hijras are automatically presumed to be criminals, both in the eyes of the public and the law. Later, when Anjum seeks school admission for the child, the school refuses as it does not accept a hijra as a legitimate parent. Anjum has to give her brother and his wife's names as the child's parents. The police, the school authorities, but also Anjum's parents display their aversion: Her mother meets Anjum only in public spaces and her father looks away when he sees her on the street, and thus both home and public spaces emerge as hostile spaces in Anjum's experience. Aftab (Anjum) realizes that he must leave his biological family, a realization that partly indicates his awareness of his marginalized position as an intersex person within his family and partly his wish to fulfill his desire by living with others like him, by becoming Anjum. Later, when she has to leave the hijra community and has nowhere to go, she goes to live in the graveyard. Here, there is no external colonizer and Anjum still has her family and siblings, yet she is treated like a pariah. Only in retrospect does one understand Janhanara Begum's "howl" at seeing her child's intersex body.

The ontological rupture between caste and the hijra body alienates hijras completely, not only resulting in a broken connection between hijras and the non-hijra populace but also nullifying hijras' claims to citizenship. This disconnection between hijras and caste communities surfaces in Khushwant Singh's novel *Delhi* (1990b) that portrays an Anjum-like hijra character, Bhagmati. Anjum and Bhagmati are shunned in almost identical ways. In *Delhi*, the anglicized narrator first encounters the bruised and inebriated Bhagmati on a crowded street in central Delhi. Except for the narrator, nobody stops to help. As the story unfolds, they become lovers. It seems like an implausible relationship, but it materializes because the deracinated, upper-caste narrator and the hijra Bhagmati are unhinged from caste norms**.** Only the anglicized narrator could see the humanity of the hijra body because his world is not limited by caste, and only as outcast figures do they come to form an unusual alliance like Roy's outcast characters who build a house in the graveyard. Early on in the novel, the anglicized narrator draws a striking parallel between the hijra body (Bhagmati) and the city of Delhi as both have been assaulted, plundered, and violated by natives and outsiders alike. He also adds that just like the city, Bhagmati is vulgar, coarse**,** repulsive, shoddy, but when one knows her intimately one sees her charm: "It is only to their lovers […] Delhi and Bhagmati reveal their true selves" (Singh 1990b, 1). However, unlike the anglicized narrator's approach toward hijras, brahminic people seldom interact with hijras except on specific occasions, such as festivals or at birth or marriage-related ceremonies. Like the anglicized narrator in Singh's *Delhi*, in Roy's novel, it is the foreign tourists who look at the hijras admiringly. One young hippy says to Anjum, " 'You are fery [sic] beautiful […]. A photo? May I?' It was the first time anybody had ever wanted to photograph her" (Roy 2017, 52). While Singh's anglicized narrator and Roy's foreigner see Bhagmati and Anjum as human, hijras are perceived as both abject and auspicious in brahminic culture. Since hijras cannot procreate, many believe that hijras can both bless and curse the fertility of others (Nanda 1999, 6). By creating both abject and sacred myths around their bodies, hijras are pushed out of the category of human.

Caste norms that categorize Roy's outcast characters as normal/abnormal, touchable/ untouchable also shape the spaces they inhabit. The ways hijra and/or Dalits are made to embody the caste and/or sexual Other as being less, incomplete or inferior also determine how the space is imagined. Broken, dusty, dirty, barren, unlit parts of the city on the one hand and completely built model colonies on the other spatialize caste binaries of 'im/puritiy,' and 'un/touchability.' This pattern manifests in how caste governs the organization of space and labor, overriding democratic principles of social equity in present-day India**.** In her essay "The Ladies Have Feelings, So … Shall We Leave It to the Experts?," Roy comments on the rising inequality through spatial images:

> It's as though the people of India have been rounded up and loaded onto two convoys of trucks (a huge big one and a tiny little one) that have set off resolutely in opposite directions. The tiny convoy is on its way to a glittering destination somewhere near the top of the world. The other convoy just melts into the darkness and disappears. (2016, 178)

This separation of the tiny brahminic convoy from the vast marginalized populace emerges frequently in *The Ministry of Utmost of Happiness.* Unlike the rest of the city, some avenues are lined with trees such as Tamarind, Jamun, Neem, and Arjun and those who live there "have cars for their dogs and gardens for their cars" (Roy 2017, 136). Through such descriptions, Roy points up the caste-inflected demography of Delhi, stressing the ways in which the brahminic elite turn Untouchables into 'unseeables,' separating the world of touchables from the world of Untouchables, through urban design. At one point in the novel, when all (outcast) members of the Jannat house drive through the city in a rented car, they see

> dense forests of apartment buildings […] towering cement statues as high as skyscrapers, of Shiva in a cement leopard-skin loincloth with a cement cobra around his neck and a colossal Hanuman looming over a metro track. They drove over an impossible-to-pee-on flyover […] towers of steel and glass growing on either side of it. But when they took an exit road off it, they saw that the world underneath the flyover was an entirely different one—an unpaved, unlaned, unlit, unregulated, wild and dangerous one, in which buses, rucks, bullocks rickshaws, cycles, handcarts and pedestrians jostled for survival. One kind of world flew over another kind of world without troubling to stop and ask the time of day. (409)

These two above- and under-the-flyover worlds manifest caste hierarchies superimposed on the city's infrastructure, a blatantly spectacular version of other caste-induced separations that permeate public institutions such as schools, banks, hospitals, and courts. A kind of division that is sustained via caste-specific management of "shit" in order to safeguard "middle-class standards of living" (Doran and Raja 2015, 205) and caste privileges.

Despite these above- and under-the-flyover worlds that emerge everywhere in the novel punctuating hijra lives and thus indicating brahminic epistemic antipathy, hijra subcultures have persisted in the Indian subcontinent's history. Hijras use several tactics to defend themselves: They appear in groups in public, and since they are frequently abused they resort to abusive language and intimidate their harassers by their loud claps called *hijra taalis*. While hijra characters clap on streets, the narrative voice tells the reader that only hijras can decode the precise meaning of these

hijra taalis. By using such maneuvers, they shield themselves and also communicate with each other freely around non-hijras. Even though multiple meanings are embedded in hijra taalis (Hall 1995, 188-195), in public places hijras primarily use taalis to shield themselves from the harassing public.

In addition to hijra taalis, hijras legitimize their social role by comparing themselves with the god Shiva, who is depicted as *ardhanareshwara* as a "half-man/half-woman god" in the Hindu iconography (Reddy 2005, 89). Shiva is one of the most sexually ambivalent deities who incorporates both male and female characteristics. By drawing their affinity with Shiva, hijras justify their role in social life. When Anjum finds herself trapped in riots in anti-Muslim Gujarat, the Hindu mobs leave her alone although she is a Muslim because they consider killing hijras inauspicious. Instead of sullying their hands in executing outcasts, upper castes rationalize their privilege and hijra abjection, based on the theory of karma. Therefore, while hijras, and other sexual minorities, experience extreme hostility, this hostility rarely translates into "persecution" (Vanita 2004, 120). Ravikumar, a Dalit writer, argues that brahminic violence has such resilence because it is always kept at "acceptable levels" (2009, 93-95). Although the Hindu theological ideas of karma and dharma play some role in containing overt violence against hijras, these ideas reinforce belief in the caste system and thus serve brahminic interests.

The brahminic framing of hijras as criminals, and yet at the same time as spiritually gifted figures, plays a key role in their exploitation. In any urban city, while upper-caste people typically working in the white-collar professions inhabit the center and Dalits mostly inhabit the periphery with little access to city resources, the hijras navigate both these spaces—the posh neighborhoods as well as the slums. However, since both these spaces are heteronormative, hijras face social enmity. Even in matters related to death and funeral practices, hijras have to be secretive because their dead bodies are considered inauspicious. Thus, their claim to city spaces remains problematic both in life and in death (Khan 2009, 445).

In hijra narratives and in Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* prejudice against hijras surfaces most strikingly when they seek medical help. Hospital staff address hijras by male pronouns, use abusive language, or make them wait in male waiting areas. This can be followed by asking hijras to sleep on the floor or admitting them to the male ward where they often face harassment by other patients**.** Also, sometimes doctors force hijras, without their consent, to show their genitals to medical students (Chakrapani 2004, 13). In Roy's novel, the practice of untouchability that shapes anti-hijra (and anti-outcast) behavior is most evident when they encounter secular spaces such as hospitals.

> The Hindu doctors who were required to conduct post-mortems thought of themselves as upper caste and would not touch dead bodies for fear of being polluted. The men who actually handled the cadavers and performed the post-mortems were employed as cleaners and belonged to a caste of sweepers and leatherworkers who used to be called Chamars. The doctors, like most Hindus, looked down on them and considered them to be Untouchable. The doctors would stand at a distance with handkerchiefs masking their noses and shout instructions to the staff about where incisions were to be made and what was to be done with the viscera and the organs. (Roy 2017, 72-73)

Caste dynamics are on full display here. Strikingly, doctors outsource their work to Untouchables without any repercussions. The vast majority of such unclaimed dead bodies are of social outcasts such as the urban poor which includes hijras. When Rubina, a young sex worker, dies, the hospital staff returns "her body with the eyes missing" (78) to her colleagues, Anwar Bhai and others:

> The hospital staff said that rats had got to them in the mortuary. But Anwar Bhai and Rubina's colleagues believed that Rubina's eyes had been stolen by someone who knew that a bunch of [hijra] whores and their pimps were unlikely to complain to the police. If it wasn't bad enough, because of the address given on the death certificate (GB Road), Anwar Bhai could not find a bathhouse to bathe Rubina's body, a graveyard to bury her in, or an imam to say the prayers. (78)

Treatment of Rubina's dead body highlights how modernity and caste emerge in ways that alter but do not erase caste hierarchies and the practice of untouchability. The hospital, an emblem of modernity, admits her but treats her body as medical waste, and the city's funeral service providers deny her a funeral because her body is marked as abject in a caste sense. The family's rejection of or indifference toward its non-normative children resurfaces in the city's bigoted civic policies and norms. In a different context, referring to the city's poor, the narrative voice says, "Sleep came to them, quick and easy, like money to millionaires. If they hadn't died of truck, they would have died of: a) Dengue fever b) The heat c) Beedi Smoke or d) Stone dust" (257). These examples indicate how the ontological indifference toward outcasts persists even when caste society adopts democratic forms of governance.

Contemporary anti-hijra incidents of violence in private and public spaces that emerge in hijra testimonies and in Roy's novel are rooted in caste and in British colonialism. In what follows, I will examine how the British colonial policies on the one hand and the upper-caste project of

nation-building on the other further exacerbated brahminic prejudices against hijra and courtesan subcultures, which continue to exist in contemporary India.

1.1 Caste and Colonialism: Outcasts in Present-Day India

In present-day India, upper-caste Indians still blame British rule for every perceived social evil,[149] but this is also a way to cover up the ills arising from Brahmanism that predates British colonialism. The British-Indian experience affirms how, by appropriating colonial politics, the upper-caste reformers imagined independent India to be only brahminic and heterosexual. The intersection of caste with colonialism and modernity intensified anti-outcast prejudice in new ways. Threatened by the arrival of European Christianity riding on the powerful wave of colonialism, the upper-caste reformers sought to homogenize India's vast diversity by eliminating all kinds of differences (Thapar 1991, 159-161). Whereas all nationalist aspirations are gendered and invented, they take bold forms when nation-building is shaped by religion.[150] Although upper-caste reformers invoked concepts such as justice, human rights, and equality, their idea of the normative citizen was modeled on and embedded in local histories of gender and sexuality. By disregarding the complexity of human bodies and human behavior, they embraced a few selective hetero-normative and pro-caste Aryan figures such as Lord Rama, as this suited their nationalist and caste agenda (Frykenberg 2008, 178; Thapar 2014, 225). This brahminic imagination that went on to form the modern Indian nation continues to affect non-brahminic, non-normative people even today, manifesting the socio-cultural ontology of caste**,** or what Thomas Hansen describes as Hindu society's "deep cultural logics and continuities" (1999, 13).

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, when Aftab's parents seek medical help for him, Dr. Nabi tells them, "While treatment would surely help, there would be 'Hijra tendencies' that were unlikely to ever go away" (Roy 2017, 17). On hearing this the elated father, Mulaqat Ali, says, "Tendencies are no problem. Everybody has some tendency or the other … tendencies can always be managed" (17). Mulaqat Ali knows that queer tendencies exist in everybody, but he also believes that such tendencies can be fixed, a belief that has been embedded in brahminic nationalist discourse. The upper-caste nationalists wanted men and women to emulate figures like Rama and Sita, and they expected that those with "tendencies" should manage themselves by changing their diet and lifestyle.[151] If one looks at the figures of Rama and Sita and the democratic nation's image

[149] Tharoor (2016, n.p.) illustrates how the British "looted" India and damaged its economy in particular.

[150] Despite the frequently cited brahminic notions of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (all the world is one family) and *sarvadharma sambhava* (equal respect for all religions), upper-caste scholars have attributed the historical legacy of Indian nationalism—whether Gandhian or Nehruvian, civic or cultural— to "a single source of Indian tradition, viz. ancient Hindu civilization" (Chatterjee 1992, 149). See also Singh (2017).

[151] For instance, Gandhi's preoccupation with *satvik* (vital and virtuous) diet, in the final analysis, is his

of itself, it is difficult to link the two with the caste system. However, it is through the idealization of the Rama and Sita figures that the nation 'performs' its brahminhood.[152] Those who emulate these figures are admired, and those who choose not to, or cannot, are shunned. The norm of arranged marriages and negligible divorce rates indicate how notions of caste im/purity are central to brahminic culture in present-day India.

Aftab's flight from home is his flight from the claustrophobic caste norms that seek to fix him. While he enjoys singing and displays "hijra tendencies" growing up, his father seeks to curb those tendencies by discouraging Aftab to sing "Thumri and Chaiti" (17)[153] and by force-feeding him "stories about their warrior ancestors and their valour on the battlefield" (17). Aftab remains unmoved by the stories of warriors and their victories, but he enjoys listening to tales about beautiful princesses and wants to be like them, contrary to his father's expectations. When Aftab leaves home and joins the hijra community, he feels, "It was the only place in his world where he felt the air made way for him […] like a school friend making room for him on a classroom bench" (19). A father's efforts to fix his hijra child are a smaller, private version of the collective brahminic

attempt to regulate his body and desire and, more importantly, of those he sought to reform. Upper-caste reformers (as well as Gandhi himself), under British influence, believed vegetarianism to be the cause of their colonization and therefore something to be rejected. Swami Vivekananda advocated, "beef, biceps, and Bhagvadgita" (quoted in Rao 2002, 65). However, the mature Gandhi could connect his approach toward satvik food to his everyday practice of brahmacharya and ahimsa in ways that ultimately strengthened caste order and heterosexuality. See also chapter II, section 1.

[152] Upper-caste reformers were obsessed with caste purity. While Gandhi was less explicit in his pro-caste politics, others were more direct in espousing a pro-caste stance toward heterosexuality and gender. Swami Vivekananda, an influential Hindu reformer, wrote, "O Thou, Mother of the Universe, vouchsafe manliness unto me! […] take away my unmanliness and make me a Man!" (quoted in Chatterjee and Naha 2014, 25). As he cast himself into a Rama-like warrior figure, he framed women only as wives and mothers. Like many others in modern and premodern India, he supported the brahminic idea that "[t]he height of a woman's ambition is to be like Sita […] the patient, the all-suffering, the ever-faithful, the ever-pure wife" (Vivekananda 2000, 11-12). A man who is not "manly" enough and a woman who is not "chaste" enough have therefore no place in this brahminic imaginary that is heterosexual and pro-caste. Gandhi was not completely immune to uttering similar regressive statements. When in 1925, the Bengal Congress Committee organized some women prostitutes under its banner, Gandhi was furious. The body of the prostitute symbolized the opposite of Sita's chastity, and therefore posed a threat to the brahminic project of nation-building.

[153] Thumri and Chaiti are semi-classical vocal genres of Indian music. In brahminic culture, whereas classical genres such as Dhrupad and, to a lesser extent, Khayal, are revered because they are structured forms through which ragas are sung, semi-classical genres such as Thumri and Ghazal are resented even though they are also rooted in classical music. However, unlike the highly structured Dhrupad, Thumri singing is emotive and full of rasa; it allows the singer to improvise. Thumri and Ghazal are seen as non-brahminic articulations: Thumri is perceived to dilute the purity of ragas; Ghazal is resented for its ungendered poetry, and its form which is perceived as immoral. Thus, unlike Dhrupad, Thumri and Ghazal singing are seen as inconsistent with brahminic music and thus culture. Immediately after independence, All India Radio discouraged singers from singing Thumri. In popular culture, Ghazal and Thumri singing are still associated with decadent Mughal culture. In Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, as long as Aftab lives in his parental home his father discourages him from singing Thumri while other children ridicule him. But once he leaves home and becomes Anjum, liberated from parental home rules, she sings Thumri and recites Ghazals freely like a Lucknow tawaif.

determinations that seek to homogenize diversity in both a caste and a sexual sense. When Mulaqat Ali's tactics fail, Aftab loses his membership to the family and, by extension, to his community. Therefore, as a hijra, Anjum does not belong to the above- and under-the-flyover worlds but somewhere in the middle, thus belonging neither in touchable nor untouchable world. As a consequence, she goes to live in a graveyard.

The more extreme version of Hindu upper-caste reformers from the late colonial period with their fascist ideologies also appear in Anjum's life. Once when she is trapped in Hindu-Muslim riots in Gujarat and the Hindu lynching mob is going to kill her, someone says, "*Nahi yaar, mat maro, Hjiron ka maarna apshagun hota hai.* Don't kill her, brother, killing Hijras brings bad luck" (62), but they force her to say, "*Bharat Mata Ki Jai! Vande Mataram!* She did. Weeping, shaking, humiliated beyond her worst nightmare. Victory to Mother India! Salute the Mother!" (63). Later when Anjum is back in Delhi, she teaches Zainab, her adopted daughter, the Gayatri mantra, a Sanskrit chant—"*Om bhur bhuvah svaha. Tat savitur varenyam. Bhargo devasya dhimahi. Dhiyo yo nah pracodayat*" (47-48)—so that she can pass Zainab off as Hindu in (anti-Muslim) "mob situations" (47). Neither Anjum nor Zainab has any idea what the chant means, but Anjum makes Zainab repeat it for she fears that "Gujarat could come to Delhi any day" (48). Prior to this, the narrative voice has already warned the reader about the political climate in the country, whose Prime Minister and senior ministers "were members of an old organization that believed India was essentially a Hindu nation […]. [They] openly admired Hitler and compared the Muslims of India to the Jews of Germany. Now, suddenly, as hostility against Muslims grew, it began to seem to the Organization that the whole world was on its side" (41). Unlike countless other Muslims, Anjum does not get killed but she is scarred for life, whereas

> [t]he chief minister with cold eyes and a vermillion forehead would go on to win the next elections. Even after the Poet-Prime Minister's government fell at the Centre, he won election after election in Gujarat. Some people believed he ought to be held responsible for mass murder, but his voters called him Gujarat ka Lalla. Gujarat's Beloved. (63)

The present-day Hindu nationalism in India is gaining strength from anti-Muslim sentiments circulating the world. Although the Hindu mob finds Anjum with the "proficiency of bloodhounds" (62), they do not kill her because she is a hijra. A strange intersection of caste, modernity, and

global Islam leads to the butchery of minorities but spares a hijra. The Hindu-Muslim Gujrat riots that Roy's novel depicts are rooted in caste but also in colonial politics.[154]

Returning to the question of the British-Indian experience in colonial India and its impact on present-day India, the British, after having established themselves by the mid-nineteenth century, were keen to suppress subcultures they considered uncivilized. Hijras and tawaifs bore the brunt of this reformative zeal. Even though prejudice against hijras and tawaifs existed in pre-colonial India, the British went one step further by criminalizing them. Since hijra and tawaif subcultures did not exist in their own cultures, the British panicked when they encountered them in India, especially the hijra subculture (Hinchy 2019b, 27). They judged hijras and tawaifs to be inferior, believing that they needed to be reformed and enacted all kinds of laws to contain hijra and tawaif subcultures, not knowing how these reforms would eventually serve Brahminism and ultimately stigmatize hijras and tawaifs. While their intent was to impose 'superior' Victorian values on 'barbaric' native practices, the upper-caste reformers appropriated the colonial strategy and deployed it against hijras and tawaifs to legitimize Brahminism and to reimagine India as brahminic and heterosexual. Buoyed by the colonial legacy, upper-caste reformers acted against hijra and tawaif subcultures with a kind of highhandedness that mirrors present-day India in which incidents of anti-hijra or Dalit violence are normalized while tawaifs' are erased from public memory.

When the British began to implement strict anti-hijra laws, the upper-caste Indians welcomed these laws and restrictions. From the British perspective, by criminalizing and disciplining these effeminate men, they were reforming the culture as a whole, thus justifying their rule over an 'inferior' race incapable of looking after itself.[155] For the upper-caste reformers, however, the British anti-hijra stance was a welcome move because it aligned with Brahminism. Even though hijras comprise a tiny percentage of the population, they were held responsible for many social ills such as child trafficking,[156] and since hijras also worked as prostitutes, they were viewed as carriers of disease and a threat to social order and well-being. The British and later the brahminic reformers exploited hijras and tawaifs in self-serving ways.[157] From the late nineteenth

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[154] The British policy of "divide and rule" was central to British rule in India, which also played a decisive role in India's Partition in 1947. Sir John Strachey wrote that the hostility among native populations on the basis of "caste and creed" are absolutely essential to "our political position" in India (1888, 225). Lord Elphinstone wrote, "*divide et impera* was the old Roman motto, and it should be ours" (quoted in Stewart 1951, 54).

[155] Charu Gupta (2011, 12-35) does not specifically discuss hijras' or tawaifs' sexuality, but she focuses on the British approach to the regulation of sexuality in India, which helped in the construction of sexuality as heteronormative and non-normative sexualities as abject (2011, 12-35). See Goel (2016, 537).

[156] The British criminalized hijras (and tawaifs). Hijras were suspected of "sodomy, kidnapping and castration" (Hinchy 2019a, para. 4). See also Hinchy (2014, 249-280).

[157] In colonial India, both the British and brahminic reformers played with the idea of manhood in

century onward when the Indian struggle for independence started and came into full swing in the twentieth century, upper-caste reformers began to enforce British laws and values far more resolutely than the British ever did **(**Banerjee 1989, 155-156). Whereas no one in pre-colonial India branded hijras, or tawaifs, as criminals, now even the general public began to perceive them as deviant and dangerous. In nineteenth and early twentieth century brahminic discourse, outcast figures, particularly the tawaif, are narrated in terms of filth, pollution, and impurity, "of man-eating non-mothers," the grotesque antithesis of nurturing, pure, self-sacrificing women like Sita (Dewan 2019, 251). However, Kulsoom Bi, the head of the hijra household in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* knows the precolonial history of hijras. She tells the younger hijras—who have, like the general public, internalized the anti-hijra version of their history—about their glorious past. Kulsoom Bi takes them to the Red Fort to watch "the Sound and Light Show" (Roy 2017, 49)—a government-approved history of the emperors who ruled from there. At a specific point, when a court hijra appears momentarily, Kulsoom Bi and other hijras start clapping: " '*There*!' Ustad Kulsoom Bi would say, like a triumphant lepidopterist who has just netted a rare moth. 'Did you hear that? That is *us*. That is our ancestry, our history, our story. We were never commoners, you see, we were members of the staff of the Royal Palace' " (51). Although this moment lasts briefly, it is significant for hijras: "To be present in history, even as nothing more than a chuckle, was a universe away from being absent from it […]. A chuckle, after all, could become a foothold in the sheer wall of the future" (51). By remembering such alternative histories, hijras deflect some of the negativity that the dominant culture thrusts upon them. However, the dominant brahminic narrative continues to imagine the Indian nation as heterosexual and upper caste, excluding outcasts from its imaginary, pushing them into graveyards and ghettos, and thus increasing their vulnerability, as we see in Roy's novel and in hijra narratives.

Hijra subcultures are almost the simulacra of tawaif's subcultures, and they share many commonalities although elite tawaifs were genuine sophisticates. The colonial authorities and the upper-caste nationalist reformers dealt with both in similar ways. The British saw tawaifs as "nautch **(**dancing**)** girls"[158] and prostitutes, ignoring the fact that they were highly educated and

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self-serving ways. Whereas the British justified their presence by constructing the effeminate colonial subject, upper-caste reformers framed masculinity in a pro-brahminic way. Both upheld heterosexual dominance, procreative imperatives, and modern monogamous ideals of marriage (Gupta 2011, 14). In such a scenario, any expression of "deviant" sexuality was seen as a "disgrace" in male behavior (17). See also Nair (2008).

[158] The word "nautch" is the anglicized form of the Hindi word nāc, meaning dance, originating from the Sanskrit *nṛtya.* Despite the appendage of "girl", the term was used for women of any age. In both brahminic and British imagination they were profoundly celebrated and fiercely censured. However, The Contagious Disease Act (CDA) imposed by the British in 1868 marked these women performing artists as prostitutes, which later on lead to even more aggressive anti-nautch (and anti-dance) campaigns when

financially independent women. They were adept in speaking different languages, in writing poetry, and in partaking in intellectual conversation. They traveled on their own, chose the men with whom they wanted to have relations, and formed networks with chosen kin (Dyson 1978, 147; Jagpal 2009, 254). Helen Petrovna Blavatsky wrote, "Only the nachnis […] can be said to be free and happy and live respected by others" (1892, 122). The *Indian Messenger* even reported that dancing girls "moved more freely in native society than public women in civilized countries are even allowed to do and that they were treated with greater "attention and respect than married women" (cited in Punjab 1894, 104). Some of these tawaifs were among the highest taxpayers in the city of nineteenth-century Lucknow (Oldenburg 1990, 259). They owned houses, agricultural land, and manufacturing and retail establishments. Wealthy patrons visited tawaif *kothas* not only for entertainment but also to converse with tawaifs (Dewan 2019, 101). The British saw them as deviant figures with the potential to disrupt their hegemony. This fear was realized because tawaifs did support the anti-British revolution of 1857 (Dewan 2019, 109). Tawaif kothas were indeed the places where ideas opposing British rule fomented. However, tawaifs were only indirectly involved in the revolt of 1857. After the British curbed the revolt, they criminalized tawaifs and imposed various taxes on them, thus reducing their social position in society (Dewan 2019, 84-87). While some members of upper-caste communities opposed the anti-tawaif policies of the British, they showed no such concern for hijras—after all, tawaifs, unlike hijras, were part of the heterosexual continuum. By imbibing British prejudices, upper-caste reformers (including Gandhians) embarked upon large-scale campaigns against tawaifs, and as the Indian struggle for independence gained momentum, they were already treating them as if they were a contagion that must be contained to establish the nation. While these reformers were pressing for the empowerment of upper-caste women, they were censuring tawaifs who already were empowered.

Whereas tawaifs do not appear in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy uses tawaif tropes in depicting hijra characters that resonate with tawaifs' lifestyles. Like tawaifs, hijras sing, dance, and live non-normative lifestyles. The first section of the novel that deals with the hijra household refers to well-known actresses such as Rekha (Roy 2017, 123), Madhubala (26), Wahida Rehman (20), and Nargis (20)[159] who immortalized tawaif characters on celluloid. Bombay Silk, the first hijra, that Anjum (at that time still Aftab) sees is an 'inferior' version of an elite tawaif. Later, after Anjum becomes the permanent resident of the Khwabgah, she wears "the sequined, gossamer kurtas and pleated Patiala salwars, […] silver anklets, glass bangles and dangling earrings. She had […]

taken up by upper-caste reformers.

[159] Actress Nargis (1921-1981) was the daughter of tawaif Jaddanbai (1892-1949) and granddaughter of tawaif Daleepbai of Allahabad (Vanita 2017, 5).

outlined her eyes with kohl and blue eye shadow and gave herself a luscious, bow-shaped Madhubala mouth of glossy-red lipstick" (26). Not only does Anjum become a much sought-after hijra in Delhi, she learns how to talk and seduce, modeling herself on the actress Madhubala who played a tawaif role in K. Asif's 1950 classic film *Mughal–e–Azam*. Like tawaifs, Anjum recites Urdu poetry, knows Ragas such as Yaman, Pooriya Dhanashree, Durga, and Bhairav, and sings "Chaiti and Thumri with the accomplishment and poise of a Lucknow courtesan" (12). Also, by referring to the real world or *Duniya* as an illusion, hijras and tawaifs stress their status as social outcasts and use brahminic terms to condemn the caste-society from which they are excluded.

In contemporary India, although real-life tawaifs have completely disappeared, they appear periodically in films in which they are framed as decadent women who crave middle-class respectability, only to die or disappear at the end of the story**.** In Kamal Amrohi's classic film *Pakeezah* (1972), when a brothel dancer Nargis is spurned by her lover's family, she goes to give birth to her child in a graveyard and immediately afterward she dies. The child becomes an accomplished tawaif Sahibjaan. Like tawaifs in film and popular discourse, Sahibjaan, like her mother before, is portrayed as a tragic figure, going through life like a living corpse. While the public Sahibjaan entertains, the private Sahibjaan talks about herself in a language laden with metaphors of pain, death, burials, and graves. Such degraded depictions of tawaifs compel upper-caste women to cast themselves as Sita-like figures—as the antithesis of the tawaif. These films insist on presenting tawaifs as sad, forlorn women craving love and marriage or as women scheming to destroy marriages by seducing men. In *Dancing with the Nation* (2017), Ruth Vanita presents a more scholarly view on tawaifs in Indian cinema:

> Even when a courtesan character is absorbed into marriage at the end of the film, her friends remain outside of it; the matrilineal household persists. Courtesans' lives and performances insistently remind spectators that civilization and history cannot be entirely subsumed into contemporary formations. The courtesan's voice is the residual voice of excess that haunts and undercuts the earnest didacticism of the modern nation. (8)

The courtesan's "residual voice" takes a dominant aspect when one begins to probe popular culture, especially the performing arts.

As late as the 1980s, the local elite would send their daughters to learn high art forms from tawaifs. Rarely do dominant narratives acknowledge tawaifs' contribution to Indian popular culture and their role in India's struggle for independence from 1857 onward until Gandhi's era (Dewan 2019, 65; Kidwai 2004, 48). Unlike tawaifs, male musicians who were employed by tawaifs for

over two centuries[160] continued to flourish in independent India. Even though both male musicians and tawaifs played key roles in contributing to art forms, in contemporary India, only the latter are accorded recognition while tawaifs are practically forgotten. Many well-known male musicians deny their past associations with tawaifs, but they acknowledge them in private (see Dewan 2019, 3-4) which adds to brahminic prejudice against tawaifs who now are perceived as emblems of Mughal decadence.

By branding tawaifs as immoral, brahminic reformers in colonial India achieved two things. First, it helped them create ideal, Sita-like women who were the opposite of tawaifs, and Rama-like men who avoided tawaifs. Second, by vilifying tawaifs, the brahminic reformers reframed Muslim culture as being decadent. By portraying Hindu upper-caste women as respectable and tawaifs as being both abject and non-brahminic, the upper-caste reformers imagined an exclusively brahminic space where pro-caste practices could flourish. In addition, they were selective in their depiction of the tawaif. Unlike the genuine elite tawaif from the colonial and Mughal era, tawaif-like figures that appeared in Indian mythology and Hindu kingdoms are presented as patriotic, loyal, and goddess-like figures (Heidi 2007, 57-75, 80-81; Vanita 2017, 164-167). Such brahminic representations not only serve to control women, they also make Hinduism seem sacred while other minority, non-brahminic religions as being both foreign and inferior.

In present-day India, incidents of violence against hijras, Dalits, and other marginalized groups may seem like casual occurrences, but they are rooted in caste and in British colonialism. Although all outcast figures encounter brahminic violence, they experience it differently. Dalit lynching, the disappearance of tawaifs, and everyday violence against hijras and other sexual minorities are inextricably linked to the caste system. The law criminalizing rape, which can protect a woman, does not protect hijras or even men when they are rape victims (Pathak 2016a, 368). Instead, the police disregards the law against them. Also, several LGBT organizations, predominantly upper caste, that demand equal rights for sexual minorities either ignore Dalits and hijras or use them in self-serving ways that recall pre-independence brahminic nationalist politics. Since caste persists, it governs even organizations that aim at inclusion (Tellis 2012, 149-150). In contemporary brahminic culture, hijras continue to be perceived as deviant people who require correction or punishment (Hinchy 2019a) and upper-caste people, especially men, continue to learn to resent hijras from early on because hijra bodies threaten to destabilize the clear-cut ideals of masculinity and femininity, a framework in which caste order perseveres.

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[160] Courtesans were patrons of poets, scholars, holy men, and teachers of music and dance (Manuel 1987, 12-17; Sharar 1975, 192; Oldenburg 1984, 131-142; Kidwai 2004, 50).

2. Mehfils in the Graveyard: A Non-Brahminic reading

In sharp contrast to brahminic imagination in which the graveyard looms large as a negative space, in non-brahminic (Muslim and Christian) imagination graveyards appear as sacred spaces, providing points of contact between the living and the dead. One can touch, grieve, mourn, pray, and even talk with the departed, and thus the graveyard emerges as a place that comforts the living. Since caste pervades brahminic culture—spaces such as home, community, and nation—it compels non-brahminic people to submit to its hegemony, ousting all those who refuse to submit to liminal spaces. In the *Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* this liminal space is imagined to be a graveyard**,** a space beyond liminality, as it is amidst the dead, which reflects the powerful dissemination of brahminic discourse in stigmatizing outcasts. Without bypassing the everyday-lived realities, when Roy tells galling stories of a hijra, a Dalit, urban poor, and religious minorities, it seems that caste is invincible and that its narrative is the only narrative. But a very different picture arises when one looks at the stories of her outcast characters from a non-brahminic perspective—that is, by shifting the focus from the activities of upper castes to the lives and actions of outcasts. Since Roy's outcast characters do not see a graveyard as an abject space, they create an affirming space for themselves in it that they call the Jannat house. Anjum, the founder of this commune, says, "I'm a *mehfil,* I'm a gathering. […] Everyone is invited" (Roy 2017, 4). Despite the dominant brahminic discourse that valorizes only certain types of behavior, relations, and people, and discards those who challenge such ideations as anti-brahminic, the novel depicts the demonized, whom Roy calls the "Unconsoled," to be living challenging yet satisfying lives.

When Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) appeared, many readers thought its title to be ironic. The title is reminiscent of George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in which ministries do the opposite of what they claim to do. Orwell's "Ministry of Love" is an armed fortress surrounded by "barbed-wire entanglements, steel doors, and hidden machine-gun nests" (1949, 6) in which the novel's central characters Winston and Julia are tortured for falling in love. Since Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* engages with extreme situations involving blood and state-sanctioned violence, her Western readers thought that she used magic realism to tell extreme stories of present-day India.[161] The novel opens with one such story. Anjum, a hijra (intersex) person, when left with no other option, goes to live in a graveyard. Soon afterward, the graveyard becomes a dwelling place for others who share Anjum's situation as social outcasts. Despite their traumatic pasts and bleak presents, Roy's outcast characters start afresh. They sing, laugh, and some of them fall in love. The seemingly realistic novel erupts with tiny signs of regeneration. Drawing upon citizenship theory, and romance tropes in the context of brahminic

[161] Roy mentioned this in her conversation with Annelies Beck at *Kaaitheatre* in Brussels on June 15, 2017.

culture, I will analyze Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (*2017*)* and compare it briefly with her first novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). I argue that although Roy's former novel engages with caste violence, tribal unrest, and the Kashmir conflict, it contains significant romance tropes, and it emerges as an anti-brahminic novel in that it challenges the dominance of a single brahminic narrative that emphasizes and enforces caste and heteronormativity.

Since the task of defining romance tropes seems to be an ongoing process, I rely mainly on tropes of 'arranged marriage,' 'boy meets girl,' 'fatal attraction,' 'forbidden love,' arguing that these romance tropes acquire radically different aspects in a brahimnic context. Caste by its very nature is anti-desire because upper-caste communities compel their members to marry within their caste community so that caste purity is maintained. Thus, such a society not only limits desire to heterosexual desire, it validates heterosexual marriages only when they are mediated by caste norms. Seen this way, arranged marriages in the context of caste have very little to do with romance or love. Rather, "marital alliances are largely dictated by conventions of duty and responsibility" while emotional and sexual compatibility are overlooked in such arrangements (Dewan 2019, 13).

Since arranged marriages are common and compulsory in India (Dickey 2000, 468), they suffocate all those who want to marry for love and pursue desire on their own terms. By defying caste-appropriate 'arranged marriage,' one enacts daring and courage, often associated with romance. The imagination that one can transcend or mold caste norms, especially when chances of doing so are bleak, is at the heart of romance. By referring to the trope of the 'arranged marriage' in the context of caste society, I want to highlight that we need to extend the list of romance tropes and recognize that they are culturally specific and acquire new characteristics and uses when transposed to different locales. By considering the specificity of caste, I seek to examine in what ways romance tropes emerge in Roy's fiction, how they illuminate the social beliefs that caste society holds about who is deemed worthy of love and happiness, and how they illuminate Roy's outcast characters' resilience and creativity that the brahminic narrative denies them.

Unlike *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* Roy's first novel *The God of Small Things* deals with a story of cross-caste, transgressive love that is consummated spectacularly in a lush green tropical landscape, but it is a 'closed' novel at its core, choking its main characters to death. Caste envelops the cross-caste lovers. Despite the novel's inviting landscape, its strikingly sensuous imagery, and its fascinating central characters Ammu and Velutha, the novel is essentially the story of caste's resilience which overpowers individual desire. In contrast, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* engages with urban violence and regional conflicts and insurgencies, but within this 'hyper-realistic' mode the novel is grounded in hope; its marginalized characters transcend societal restrictions. Unlike Ammu and Velutha who meet in the dark only to return to their abodes at

daybreak; in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, characters go out in broad daylight, and if they decide to leave their home or their native place they do not look back. Implicit in their leaving home is their hope to find a better life elsewhere. Despite societal odds, the novel's marginalized characters—a hijra, an 'Untouchable' man, and other minority figures—pursue their own journeys. Without undermining the epistemological violence that hijras and other outcast figures endure, Roy's narrative humanizes their stories and offers alternative ways to imagine a more inclusive and equal society.

2.1 From Aftab to Anjum: Coming Home

In a rare coming-out story, when Ghazal Dhaliwal (2016), born as a boy into a middle-class Sikh family, started living as a woman, some accepted her but many criticized her saying that she changed her sex because, unlike a gay man, as a transgender woman she can have more sex with men to which she replied that it has never been about men, nor about sex: She wanted to love herself. Implicit in criticizing her choice is queerphobia of Ghazal Dhaliwal's nonnormative body and desire. By owning both, she is transcending the normal, and thus making her desire illegible in a way that exceeds or falls short of what is recognized as romance even though her story is rife with romance tropes. Can one read or represent the love lives of non-normative people through popular, recognizable romance tropes? Anyone born in a wrong gender in a rigidly heteronormative, conservative family with its attendant complexities of caste, is placed in a peculiar relation to the world. The dominance of neat, normative romance tropes that reveal and constitute normative realities is such that it stifles the articulation of queer desire, thus invalidating queer people**.** Like Ghazal's unconventional romance and struggle, Roy's intersex character seeks to embrace the woman inside rather than seeking a lover. As Aftab becomes Anjum, she begins a lifelong romance with herself and others in both literal and figurative ways.

As a hijra, Anjum is placed in an oblique relation to the world. Even before she opens her eyes, her mother, Jahanara Begum, shrieks with horror at what she has "created" (Roy 2017, 8). Later Jahanara Begum and her husband take their child secretly to a doctor's clinic to fix the child's intersex body. They have already invented lies as to the 'where-and-why' questions that their neighbors might ask (questions that have not yet been posed), which underscores the strength of caste norms and brahminic fear of non-normative bodies in everyday life.[162] At school, although Aftab displays a talent for music and is admired by his teachers, this does not save him from harassment. The other children make ditties to ridicule him. "*He's a She. He's not a He or a She.*

[162] Kalpana Lajmi's film, *Darmiyan: In Between* (1997) that tells the story of a movie actress who raises her intersex child as a boy to protect him from hijra groups as well as from her family and community.

He's a He and a She. She-He, He-She Hee! Hee! Hee!" (12), and thus begins his first real, traumatic encounter with the world outside the home**.**

Despite the brahminic representation of hijras as abject and undesirable, the disoriented boy breaks free from his anxious and "howling" mother, muted father, and the hostile children who embody caste norms. So, once when Aftab sees an attractive Hijra on the street "wearing bright lipstick, gold high heels and a shiny, green satin salwar kameez buying bangles" (19), he follows her. There is an instant attraction. Aftab pursues the hijra with the zeal of a lover, not to make love to her, but to be like her:

> Like her he wanted to shimmer past the meat shops where skinned carcasses of whole goats hung down like great walls of meat […]. He wanted to put out a hand with painted nails and a wrist full of bangles and delicately lift the gill of a fish to see how fresh it was before bargaining down the price. He wanted to lift his salwar just a little as he stepped over a puddle—just enough to show off his silver anklets. (19)

This desire to become a hijra on seeing one comes from nowhere. At age 17, he leaves home in search of a new home and joins the hijra community household called Khwabgah, "the House of Dreams" (19). Although Khwabgah is not far from his home, to him, stepping into it feels like entering another world. On becoming Khwabgah's permanent resident, she wears "the sequined, gossamer kurtas and pleated Patiala salwars […] silver anklets, glass bangles and dangling earrings. She had […] outlined her eyes with kohl and blue eye shadow and gave herself a luscious, bow-shaped Madhubala mouth of glossy-red lipstick" (26). With her exaggerated, outrageous kind of femininity, she makes "real, biological women look cloudy and dispersed" (27). While she enjoys this space, this romance with self also has its tragic side. All the hijras at Khwabgah treat her like a new bride and she feels like one, but her body fails her:

> That night she dreamed she was a new bride on her wedding night. She awoke distressed to find that her sexual pleasure had expressed itself into her beautiful new garment like a man's. It wasn't the first time this had happened, but for some reason, perhaps because of the sari, the humiliation she felt had never been so intense. She sat in the courtyard and howled like a wolf, hitting herself on her bed and between her legs, screaming with self-inflicted pain. (27)

All the feelings of intense pleasure experienced earlier are followed by intense pain. Also, her pleasure and pain show that Aftab's "girl-part" that his family tried to fix by replacing it with the boy-part was not merely an "appendage" (19). Aftab's romance with Anjum involves passion, desire, dream, and pain.

While in conventional romance novels, men and women pursue each other, in Aftab's case, the object of desire is trapped within his body. In order to reach Anjum, he undergoes the castration ceremony. Through this act hijras gain respect in the hijra community, and also attain *nirvana,* a rebirth, and thus begin a new life, severing past connections and associations. By going through such painful rites, Anjum reinforces her agency, which in brahminic discourse often goes unremarked**.** Her transition from her biological home to her chosen home illustrates two things. First, the clutch of the normative home that marks him as an outsider: He cannot participate in everyday life rituals that gradually prepare children for heterosexual marriage and procreation. Second, brahminic society with all its institutional power cannot regulate individual desire. Aftab exercises his agency by leaving home, by pursuing his desire, and by becoming Anjum. Whatever one associates with a typical romance is at *work* here except that male and female actors are not two independent entities, but they reside in one body.

As Anjum she finds home in a place that not only supports but celebrates Aftab's new life as Anjum. While Roy's *The God of Small Things* does not allow any such escape to its central characters, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* grants Aftab a queer space (the hijra house) that gives him freedom from the constraints of his biological family. Once in the community of hijras, Anjum becomes the rage in Delhi society. It is not that by becoming hijra, Anjum suffers no indignities on the streets, and that she faces no problems within the hijra community, but as Anjum she is in sync with herself. She lives on her terms, and expresses herself without constraints. Brahminic indifference frees her from brahminic norms.

Much later in life, when someone tells Anjum that her name when written backward reads Majnu, a male name, Anjum laughs because she contains both Romeo and Juliet. But afterward the same man tells Anjum that when her name reads backward, it reads Mujna, which is no name at all. Anjum tells him: "It doesn't matter. I'm all of them, I'm Romi and Juli, I'm Laila and Majnu. And Mujna, Why not? Who says my name is Anjum? I am not Anjum, I'm Anjuman. I'm a *mehfil*, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. Is there anyone else you would like to invite? Everyone's invited" (Roy 2017, 4). Anjum's understanding of herself is radically different from how she is perceived in mainstream discourse. If the word "romance" indicates "an excess of passion, yearning and bliss leading to conflict and drama" (Vanita 2013a, 36), then surely Anjum is leading a life of romance. However, by calling herself a *mehfil*, she also seems to have

transcended personal desire in a way that enables her to love others, by imaginatively putting herself in the place of, to use Shelley's words, "another and many others" so that the pleasure and pain of the "species" become her own (1962, 759). Also, by referring to herself as "a *mehfil* […] a gathering of everybody and nobody" (Roy 2017, 4), she invokes the Hindu concept of "Brahman": "I am one, I shall become many, and be manifested" (see chapter II, 15-17). Interestingly, it is not a Brahmin, but a hijra character that comes to embody Brahman in its truest sense. Roy's anti-brahminic gaze exposes how dominant brahminic narratives on hijras conceal the complexity of hijra lives by tending toward, to use Toth's phrase, "the closure of meaning" (2011, 186), thus denying hijras their humanity. Although brahminic discourse frames hijras as abject and narrates them in ways that reinforce violence against them, nowhere does Anjum appear to be an abject figure in the novel. Unlike real women from so-called respectable upper-caste families, Anjum lives a tough but fiercely independent life. She builds a guest house in a graveyard that she calls *a jannat* or paradise, a commune, a *mehfil*, where everyone is welcome. Thus, unlike brahminic narratives, Roy's novel presents hijras realistically.

Anjum's *mehfil* has members, both dead and alive, whose life journeys echo Anjum's. Like her, they find themselves in an odd relationship with their families and communities on account of either their caste or sexuality, and thus as social outcasts they join Anjum's mehfil in the graveyard. By creating safe spaces in a hostile brahminic environment, they chart a path full of daring and romance. By following Anjum's life, the novel tells the story of hijras, and likewise, by following Dayachand's life, a Dalit man, the novel demonstrates the full horror of caste. Like hijras, Dalits are marginal figures. In addition to practicing untouchability against Dalits, the upper-caste people brutalize them in a variety of ways (Dutta 2019, paras. 1-5; Roy 2014, 24-25). Before looking at Dayachand's romance story that leads to marriage, I would like to detail his life as an 'Untouchable' man because that will show how his typical romance story involves an atypical journey. Dayachand calls himself Saddam Hussein in the city, but at one point, he admits his real name and Dalit identity, and narrates his traumatic past to Anjum:

> 'We found the dead cow easily,' Saddam said. 'It's always easy, you just have to know the art of walking straight into the stink. We loaded the carcass on to the Tempo and started driving home. On the way we stopped at the Dulina police station to pay the Station House Officer—his name was Sehrawat—his cut. It was a previously-agreed-upon sum, a per-cow rate. But that day he asked for more. Not just more, for *triple* the amount. […] He got angry when they said they didn't even have that much money on them. He arrested them on the charge of 'cow-slaughter' and put them in the police lock-up. […] I waited, assuming

> they were just doing some hard bargaining and would soon come to an agreement. (Roy 2017, 87-88)

Not only do Dalits work in extreme and life-threatening situations for meager money, they also face upper-caste brutality as shown by the upper-caste Police Inspector Sehrawat. When the cow's carcass begins to stink and a mob returning from a Dussehra celebration event (a Hindu festival) gets a hint about the dead cow and its assumed killers, they drag the Dalit men out of the police station and kill them. Dayachand silently witnesses the death of his father as "part of the mob that killed [his] father" (89). He leaves his native village, finds a job in the city by adopting a Muslim identity, and awaits the right opportunity to avenge his father's murder. In the meantime, he lives in the Jannat house.

Like Anjum, who becomes Anjum by negating Aftab, Dayachand becomes Saddam Hussain to quell the curse of caste. However, the Jannat house frees him from his obsession for revenge when he falls in love with Zainab (Anjum's adopted daughter), and thus emerges as a more hopeful, real representation of the 'Untouchable' Velutha from *The God of Small Things*. Unlike Velutha, who is squashed by brahminic forces so that caste order may continue, in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* caste is transcended so that Dayachand can live. Also, whereas Velutha hardly speaks, and floats as an unreal but perfect figure in the novel (Khair 2001, 138), in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* Dayachand speaks, marries, and remains an everyday Dalit. Despite differences of caste and religion, Dayachand's love story with Zainab ends in marriage.

However, not all stories that the novel tells end happily like Dayachand's because, like him, not everyone is straight, seeking a union that can be recognized as normative. The novel tells two different stories of two queer romances without emphasizing their queerness. Both intersect with Anjum's life. One is the story of Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed, a seventeenth-century Sufi saint, and the other is the story of Anjum's aunt, Begum Zeenat Kauser. Their graves lie in the Jannat house. Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed comes into the story when Jahanara Begum (Anjum's mother) visits his Dargah to cure her intersex child. While the stories about his saintliness and spirituality are well-known, few know about his homosexuality. The narrator says, "Most knew he was a Jewish Armenian merchant who had travelled to Delhi from Persia in pursuit of the love of his life. Few knew the love of his life was Abhay Chand, a young Hindu boy he had met in Sindh" (Roy 2017, 9). His "unrequited" love for the Hindu boy led him to madness, and he lived on the streets of Shahjahanabad as a naked fakir before being publicly executed. The text stresses that he was beheaded not for his nakedness in public but for his apostasy. However, one can argue it was his nakedness that first drew the negative attention of the Muslim ruler. Although this same-sex love

story ends in Sarmad's "beheading" (9), I argue that this tragic story has a happy ending in an unconventional sense because it has gained a kind of afterlife and permanence in popular culture one associates with prototypical romance stories, such as the stories of Romeo and Juliet, and Leila and Majnu. However, by turning Sarmad Shaeed into a saint, Sarmad's same-sex love story with the Hindu boy is effectively erased.

The story of Begum Zeenat Kauser, Anjum's aunt, is a queer story that involves the unromantic or rather suffocating aspect of arranged marriages in India, but underneath her overt heterosexual marriage, her queer romance remains hidden. The novel hints at the queer dimension of Begum Zeenat Kauser's life who

> settled down in Shahjahanabad in a tiny room with a kitchen and a view of her beloved mosque. She shared it with a widow roughly her own age. She earned her living by supplying mutton korma to a restaurant in the old city where foreign tour groups came to savour local food. She stirred the same pot every day for thirty years and smelled of Korma the way other women smelled of ittar and perfume. (58)

This normative, caste-appropriate narration of Begum's life, when seen through a queer perspective, gives a very different picture that hides the exceptional forays this woman makes to be with her female lover. While understandably she, being a Muslim, leaves Delhi for Lahore at the time of India's Partition, she returns to India ten years later, leaving her husband and children behind in Lahore, Pakistan. This seems like a perfect case of an arranged marriage gone wrong. Her return to Delhi does not make sense. She says that she is "unable to live anywhere except in the immediate vicinity of Delhi's Jama Masjid. (For some reason Lahore's Badshahi Mosque did not work out as a substitute.)" (58). Roy's parenthetical remark hints at Begum's queerness to the unsuspecting reader. Begum's life in a tiny room on a crowded street, her embracing of "Korma smell," and disregard for "ittar and perfume" (58) that other women cherish suggest her opting out of the normative order. Her leaving the normative role, tied to husband and children, carries the tropes of queer desire, forbidden love, imagination, daring, and conflict with self and others that are culturally not examined because engaging with them could open up new realities, detrimental to the brahminic status quo. While the narrative does not explicitly state Begum's queerness, it alludes to it. Begum does not leave her children and husband to meddle with "cooking pots" to prepare food for foreign tourists to satisfy their hunger and please their palates. Rather, she spends thirty-long years with a woman who is her age, and like her, free from social constraints.

Referring to her research on tawaifs, Veena Oldenburg highlights the queer aspect of tawaifs' lives, disrupting the brahminic narrative in which tawaifs are always cast as women who seduce men and break families. Oldenburg recounts, "When I asked if they ever considered getting married, the 70-year-old woman with three teeth who I was speaking to asked if I thought they'd never fallen in love. She smiled at Rasoolan Bai [another courtesan] and said that they'd been together for 40 years. This is the kind of *ishq* [love] that has no name" (quoted in Deodhar 2019, para. 29) Like Anjum's aunt who leaves her children and home and spends 40 years of her life living with a widow, not all women on kothas or tawaifs' saloons are abducted or sold. Rather, they voluntarily join the tawaif community and live with other women, thus not only escaping but resisting and inverting dominant gender norms. Like Anjum's aunt Begum and other members of the Jannat House, tawaifs "in their own self-perceptions" resist dominant norms but in a nonconfrontational manner (Oldenburg 1990, 261). While in popular discourse tawaifs are portrayed only as heterosexuals, Oldenburg argues that for many tawaifs "heterosexuality itself is the ultimate *nakhrah*, and feigned passion an occupational hallmark" (277). While brahminic society emphasizes the centrality of *kismat*, or destiny, especially with regard to birth, gender, caste, and even (heterosexual) marriage, Oldenburg's research highlights the ways tawaifs change their "fate" that brahminic culture writes for them—a characteristic that most members of Anjum's house in the graveyard share.

The epistemological hold that brahminic castes exercise over outcast figures such as Anjum (a hijra), Dayachand (a Dalit), Sarmad Shaheed (a gay man), and Begum Zeenat Kauser (a queer woman) unravels when Anjum, in self-defense, confronts an upper-caste politician. Anjum's questions, body, and manner unfold in a way as if she is challenging the very ontology of caste. When someone leaves an infant on the street dying and no one knows what to do with it, Anjum proposes to adopt it, but the upper-caste politician opposes her. Whereas Anjum speaks the language of empathy and romance, the brahminic politician deploys the language of reason and "proper procedure" to deflate Anjum's desire for adopting a child as unreasonable. The real conflict involves no binaries. The brahminic politician is seeking to reinforce the status quo that a hijra seems to disrupt. The narrative emphasizes how differently they are placed in the world.

> He, who filled in forms and ticked boxes. She, who never knew which box to tick, which queue to stand in, which public toilet to enter […] He, who believed he was always right. She, who knew she was all wrong, always wrong. He, reduced by his certainties. She, augmented by her ambiguity. He, who wanted a law. She, who wanted a baby. (Roy 2017, 122)

Whereas the novel engages with the theme of queerness throughout, here we see how the male, upper-caste, mainstream, *realistic* politician obstructs the queer, outcast, marginal, and *romantic hijab* from fulfilling her desire. Epistemologically, it is the "reasonable" (brahminic) mind that creates caste-hierarchies and marks some bodies as outcasts. Seen in this way, Anjum is the byproduct of the politician's brahminic mind that classifies and categorizes human beings as high and low, as touchable and untouchable**.** The narrative invites the reader to ponder over the hijra-politician negotiation in which, through the use of reason, the politician tries to contain the hijra. However, when Anjum's genuine desire is quashed by brahminic logic, she resorts to a hijra *taali* (clap)—a resounding, wordless response to the brahminic reason that seeks to thwart a hijra's desire of raising a child. More than her argument, it is the sudden onslaught of Anjum's taali and dance and the overall illegibility of her performance that baffle and make the politician retreat. Here, Anjum's taali declares her anger, but in everyday life, hijras use taalis primarily to deflect insults that people hurl at them or to signal "danger in the vicinity" (Hall 1995, 192).

Whereas disdain for hijras is rampant and explicit in the culture, upper-caste communities are more discrete and strategic in regulating the queer desire of non-hijra sexual minorities. While hijras are ousted, non-hijra queers are dealt with in a way that either tames them into submission or punishes them for their transgression without naming the transgression. The upper-caste politician's appeals for "proper procedure," for reason, and for how things should be are the very things that either lead to "beheading," that is, the persecution of queers as in the case of Sarmad Shaheed, or to keep them in the domain of the unnameable and unspeakable, as in the case of Begum Zeenat Kauser. While Begum's story disappears into nothingness as it remains embedded in the domain of the unspeakable, Sarmad Shaheed's publicly displayed queerness meets the same fate as its ultra visibility effectively makes it invisible. Anjum, Dayachand, Begum Zeenat, and Sarmad Shaheed pursue their romances, but the brahminic discourse deromanticizes their stories by placing them into the non-human realm of either sainthood or untouchability, and when such placings are not possible, it strips these stories of their meaning, either by compelling outcasts to live in graveyards or by burying their stories in the overpowering smell of a "Korma dish."

Despite the hurdles that these outcast characters face, they dare and succeed in building the Jannat house in the graveyard. Over a period of time, all kinds of people, also birds and animals, come to live in the Jannat House. In the graveyard, the members of the Jannat House not only bury unidentified bodies, they grow "brinjals, beans, chillies, tomatoes, and several kinds of gourds" (Roy 2017, 339). Their vegetable garden suggests a new beginning and phase that lovers enter once their love is consummated, or what Toth calls human strife for the fulfillment of desires as "physical

and [...] spiritual beings" (2011, 196). It is here that the 'Untouchable' Dayachand falls in love and marries Anjum's adopted daughter, Zainab. When Tilottama, an educated, upper-caste woman, joins the Jannat house and starts teaching impoverished children, the narrative voice observes, "So all in all, with a People's Pool, a People's Zoo, a People's school, things were going well in the old graveyard. The same, however, could not be said of the Duniya" (Roy 2017, 400). Although marked as undesirable by upper-caste communities, Roy's outcast characters create their own space. They sing songs, cook food, and some fall in love. Also, whereas every member has a tragic story, they are not assailed by guilt. The text, however, alludes to the guilt that the city's elite may experience. We see how the rich would stop at traffic signals and pull down the window door to buy a newspaper and then quickly shut it to avoid dust, hot air, and the urban poor. They seek to learn new ways to "cleanse" themselves, a fixation that indicates a brahminic epistemological approach to assuage guilt through cleansing rituals such as bathing in the Ganges (Harper 1964, 151-197).

When *The God of Small Things* ends, Ammu and Velutha promise to meet each other the following day, Ammu says to Velutha, " '*Naaley*'—tomorrow" (Roy 1998, 340). But that tomorrow has already been answered in the novel's shifting timeline; they are both already dead. However, in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* despite extreme situations in cities and hinterlands, the novel's characters do not submit to violent forces. In the national capital, it is the Jannat house in the graveyard that resists violence in its way while in Kashmir, it is dying Kashmiris who resist state force: "Dying became another way of living. Graveyards sprang up in parks and meadows, by streams and rivers, in fields and forest glades" (Roy 2017, 314). When the body of Mumtaz Afzal Malik (the young taxi driver killed by an Indian Army Officer), is recovered and delivered to his family, his clenched fist has earth in it and "mustard flowers growing through his fingers" (437). Without mitigating the reality of contemporary India, Alex Clark notes, "[O]ver the course of the novel, Anjum's graveyard home comes to function as a secular, or at least multifaith, sanctuary, protected by willpower from the turbulent outside world" (2017, para. 5). Despite violent brahminic dismissals, these outcast figures chart their unique romances, thus creating their own spaces of "utmost happiness." In addition, whereas *The God of Small Things* comments on Father Mulligan's hubris who reads Vedas so that he can effectively convert Hindus to Christianity (he ultimately becomes a Hindu himself), *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* engages with Anjum's graveyard abode, the **"**Jannat (Paradise) House," where the outcasts gather as if it were a *mehfil.* This place also manifests as a "ministry" in a biblical sense that offers refuge and meaning to the outcasts who have suffered brahminic violence—albeit without the aid of the proselytizing Father Mulligan.

Despite several contrasts between Roy's *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, they also share similarities. Whereas both novels deal with caste politics and

caste violence, the oppressed in these novels are not only human beings such as Dalit but also "small things" such as insects, spiders, dung beetles, birds, polluted rivers. At the end of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* while everyone is as asleep (which can also be read as metaphorical death of the human) Anjum looks at Guih Kyom, a dung beetle, who seems as if he were "on duty, lying on his back with his legs in the air to save the world in case the heavens fell" (Roy 2017, 436). Likewise, in *The God of Small Things* all human actors disperse or die in the end, but the spider survives and dies of natural causes. However, despite these contrasts (and similarities) between Roy's two novels—and unlike Narayan's pro-brahminic novel *The English Teacher* and Roy's anti-brahminic *The God of Small Things*—Roy's *Ministry* transcends caste not by speaking for-or-against it but by showing non-brahminic people and cultures on their own terms.

Roy does not romanticize the lives of her outcast characters. However, she draws unconventional connections between the city's precariat and its privileged by letting the city's graveyards and gated communities converge. Opposed to the glittering residential (and business) complexes in the city where people "have cars for their dogs and gardens for their cars" (Roy 2017, 136). Roy's novel presents its Other through the fragmented, trauma-embodying, botched body of the hijra, a body that mirrors, and is reflected in, the city's unpaved, unlit, and ruin-like non sites where many live to die. The more extreme the binaries of rich and poor, touchable and untouchable get, the farther the privileged move into their enclosed utopias while the poor, or Roy's "The Unconsoled," stand more exposed to all kinds of vulnerabilities. Tilottama "remembered reading somewhere that even after people died, their hair and nails keep growing. Like starlight, traveling through the universe long after the stars themselves had died. Like cities. Fizzy, effervescent, simulating the illusion of life while the planet they had plundered died around them" (214). This apocalyptic foreboding that surfaces in Tilottama emphasizes everyone's vulnerability, not only in human time but in planetary time.

VIII
Conclusion

Analyzing three major texts—R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher*, and Arundhati Roy's, *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*——in conjunction with other ancient and contemporary sources, this thesis demonstrates how caste, its pervasiveness, its erasure, and its justification (as in Gandhian politics and brahminic discourse) continue to shape modern India. I have shown how caste hierarchies have always been in place, etched into residential patterns, encoded in rural and urban spaces and infrastructure. The subcontinent's geography is thoroughly brahminizied through pilgrimage to *tirthas,* or holy sites, through Hindu rituals that are linked to place—"to hilltops and rock outcroppings, to the headwaters and confluences of rivers, to the pools and groves of the forests, and to the boundaries of towns and villages" (Eck 1981, 323). While upper castes may not consciously perpetuate caste with the intention of harming others, they practice it partially for religious reasons and partially for the privilege it affords them. At an institutional level, all socio-political organs of modern democracy are employed to maintain caste order. I demonstrate how the regulation of sexuality and the caste system in present-day India mimics the ways its policing was carried out in the past. The continuation of caste in contemporary India manifests the unbroken tradition of caste, embedded in and relayed through Sanskrit texts (Rubtcova and Pavenkov 2017). Like contemporary texts, ancient and medieval Indian texts maintain caste by erasing the figure of the Untouchable. In the past, whenever anti-caste figures or anti-caste ideas and movements erupted, they were either suppressed or co-opted and absorbed into the brahminic fold.[163] In present-day India, upper-caste communities use similar tactics to uphold the brahminic status quo, like the upper-caste families in Narayan's and Roy's novels. Unlike

[163] Not only in the Vedic period but also in medieval India, there were anti-caste movements. Religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, which originated from Hinduism, were theoretically anti-caste. Also, the Bhakti movement that started in the sixth century in south India and reached its zenith between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries in northern India gave rise to writers and reformers such as Basavanna (1105-1168), Kabir (1398-1140), Guru Nanak(1469-1539), and Meerabai (1498-1546), all of whom denounced caste. However, it was only in the colonial period that caste was challenged and dealt with as a human rights issue. The present-day Dalit movement has its roots in colonial Indian politics. Unlike the premodern attempts to reform caste, present-day engagement with caste is embedded in the realm of human rights and politics.

brahminic writers who reinforce caste, abrahminic and anti-brahminic writers fight caste (Ambedkar [1946] 2002, 132-148) and thus the 'theater' of caste continues, which has direct consequences for Dalits and other non-brahmins people. This theater also has an indirect impact on upper-caste people, which is never examined in brahminic discourse, in that the practice of untouchability degrades those over whom it is exercised and over those who exercise it in equal measure. Indian writers in English are generally considered progressive, but a closer examination of their work reveals their pro-caste proclivities as they narrate the world only as upper-caste, thus erasing the specificity of caste. With few exceptions such as Roy, most writers in English are complicit in perpetuating caste order.

This thesis identifies not only the crucial link between caste and the regulation of sexuality but also the tendency of caste ideology to suppress desire. Gandhi's "experiments with truth" and his principal goal of attaining *swaraj* (self-rule) and *moksha* (liberation) through dharma are profoundly entwined with celibacy and thus with sexuality and caste purity. The fervent brahminic desire to uphold the Gandhian narrative, especially with regard to sexuality and thus caste, and to insist on Gandhi's heterosexuality manifests the urgent brahminic need to preserve caste order. This urge is also seen in Narayan's work. His seemingly apolitical, unsensational, harmonious, and pro-brahminic depictions of Malgudi's social order emerge as a lie because it conceals how inextricably its order is linked to the practice of untouchability. The disquieting absence from his novels of Untouchables and of desire makes his world brahminic. In its dominant effects, his work emerges as a form of brahminic didacticism that seeks to retain the caste system, and thus expresses a will to dominate non-brahminic people. My thesis demonstrates that writers in Indian English, including post-colonial theorists, have not paid adequate attention to caste inequalities. Like Narayan, V. S. Naipaul, who purportedly distances himself from any ideology and insists on being objective, seems to be making a claim he cannot support because his work betrays his brahminic leanings (see chapter II, section 3).

Throughout this thesis, with a particular emphasis on R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, I have shown how the home space is infested with caste. In Narayan's *The English Teacher*, Krishna enjoys living alone but his parents and in-laws coerce him to live with his wife and their child. He is clearly a reluctant husband and family man, and his new situation takes a toll on him. On the surface everything seems fine with the couple, but an undercurrent of dissatisfaction runs through his marriage. Krishna negotiates his caste privilege with compulsory heterosexuality, which has severe repercussions for the entire family, primarily for his wife and daughter. Narayan depicts this brahminic household as an ideal family, but a closer examination reveals how deeply it is marred by caste. After his wife dies, Krishna establishes a

close friendship with the school headmaster. In line with brahminic conventions, Narayan presents the 'love-less' heterosexual marriage as ideal, and the 'love-based' relationship merely as friendship, thus erasing its queer dimension (see chapter III). Not only does such treatment erase sexual alterity, it manages sexual alterity in a way that does not allow or entail the questioning of brahminic caste and sexual politics.

Unlike the family in Narayan's novel, Roy's *The God of Small Things* introduces a far more complex and queer family. Roy's central characters do not have the Rama and Sita-like coherence of Narayan's characters. The brahminic nature of Narayan's novel is apparent from the outset, but it takes a more convoluted form in Roy's novel in which, while the divorced son exploits women who work under him, his sister, who is also a divorcee and a mother of two children, initiates a cross-caste love affair with an 'Untouchable.' Thus, both act in a manner contrary to societal norms, but only the sister is punished. In Narayan's overtly brahminic novel, the home space remains visibly functional and even ideal. In Roy's anti-brahminic novel, the brahminic family shatters. Whereas the former recalls Gandhian India, the latter reflects a post-global India with its attendant complexities. Even though Narayan's *The English Teacher* and Roy's *The God of Small Things* are set in different eras, one in colonial India and the other in post-colonial and post-globalized India, caste runs through them both. Unlike Narayan's brahminic novel, Roy's novel presents a family that is seemingly Westernized and cosmopolitan. However, at a specific point when caste order is threatened, this brahminic family sheds all its progressive pretensions and reinforces the status quo by punishing the cross-caste couple with death. What Narayan's Malgudi erases, Roy's Ayemenem reveals: namely, the dysfunctionality of the upper-caste, estate-owning family, and the exploitation of Dalits in the village. These two very different texts demonstrate the centrality of the Indian caste system across different times and social milieus. See my discussion of Narayan's *The English Teacher* and Arundhati's Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

As my thesis moves closer to twenty-first-century India, it moves from home spaces in colonial and postcolonial societies to urban spaces in post-globalized India. I demonstrate how caste operates in urban spaces. Unlike Narayan's peaceful Malgudi and Roy's lush Ayemenem, Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* does not offer any such idyllic spaces. Brahminic homes that appear in Narayan's *The English Teacher* and Roy's *The God of Small Things* do not appear in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The novel tells "a shattered story" (Roy 2017, 436) through fragments, impurities, and fluidities, dismantling the coherence that brahminic discourse produces around gender, family, community, and even nation. In contrast to the other two novels in which outcast characters either do not appear or are killed when they do, in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* the opposite happens: They take center stage. Outcast characters build a house in the

graveyard. The urban poor are seen everywhere, inhabiting Delhi's urban spaces such as slums, streets, and even graveyards, whereas upper-caste and middle and upper-middle classes live in gated neighborhoods. Thus, the city emerges as a place, as one Dalit character observes, that seems to have, "only three kinds of people […] security guards, people who need security guards, and thieves" (Roy 2017, 74). Roy's outcast characters not only appear, but they do something unexpected: They build a house in the graveyard, which they call the Jannat House. Also, by leaving their own families, and finding and creating the ones where their lives seem validated, they liberate themselves from brahminic validation and abjection. Instead of focusing on negative brahminic markers, they focus on their everyday lives and needs. Not many writers either in Indian English fiction or even in the vernacular have presented outcast characters in this way. Although Roy's novel humanizes and offers a nuanced portrayal of outcast characters, the novel also highlights the democratic nation-state as brahminic that uses Dalits, tribals, religious minorities, and other outcasts as fodder to serve brahminic interests in ways that are similar to British colonialism.

As a key player in the global economy, India does speak the language of modernity, but in everyday practice, its language of modernity works only for upper-caste people, excluding Dalits and other non-brahminic people as discussed in chapter VI. Former Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, once referred to the tribals of central India as "the biggest internal security challenge" to India's national security (PTI 2010, para. 3), thus evoking the "peace and order" syndrome that dominant castes from all walks of life eagerly accept and reiterate. In recent years, with the definitive rise of populist right-wing Hindutva politics, along with the rise of the far right in the West, brahminic forces seem to be on their way to turning democratic India into a "Hindu Rashtra" (Roy 2016, 7) with a virulence that, as Manan Ahmed Asif notes, "has no vaccine" (2020, 162). In Nehruvian India and in India until recently, Brahminism was subdued and controlled. Today, one can hear anti-Dalit and anti-minority rhetoric on a scale that makes it seem more like the norm than a fringe political tactic. In such a climate, the pro-brahminic state curbs pro-Dalit or pro-equality voices that seek to protect democratic institutions (Subramanian 2020). Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* engages with the undercurrents of world politics and its interface with Indian national politics, its internal conflicts, caste politics, and societal eruptions such as Hindu-Muslim riots. Not only does Roy's novel delineate the topography of urban India and its various conflict-ridden areas, she introduces queer politics in a way that suggests alternatives for imagining a livable world: The graveyard becomes a living place. Unlike *The God of Small Things*, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* emerges as a place where a Dalit man falls in love and marries, forgetting to avenge his father's murder—unlike the Dalit character in *The God of Small Things* who gets killed so that caste order may remain intact, and also unlike Narayan's novel where Dalit

characters never even appear. In addition, whereas hijras seldom appear in Indian writings, other than as caricatures, in Roy's novel, a hijra establishes her own family.

One solution that Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* suggests is that outcasts should not engage with caste binaries, which seems a difficult but not impossible proposition**.** By cutting themselves off from their families and communities and by not making caste the center of their lives, Roy's outcast characters make a relatively positive choice. By forming a commune, they counter brahminic toxicity. Although materially they are still tied to mainstream society, they do not excessively focus on it. Rather, they create alternative spaces they can inhabit and enjoy. Soon when an upper-caste but anti-brahminic woman, Tilottama, joins the Jannat house and starts teaching poor children who have no access to education, the graveyard emerges as a place where brahminic binaries in their most fundamental sense dissolve. A brahminic writer like Narayan cannot fathom a place without caste borders in his wildest imagination. Narayan's much-hyped authentic Malgudi, supposedly a microcosm of India, can only be the antithesis of Roy's graveyard. Although Roy's alternative spaces may seem ineffective in resisting brahminic domination, these spaces provide footholds to her outcast characters to mitigate brahminic dominion: Not only do they break the barriers of caste, gender, and class in theory, but also in their everyday lives. In a different but relevant context, Anais Nin (1975, 59) has argued that one effective way for women to fight patriarchy is not to make men the center of their lives. Roy's novel seems to suggest a similar approach as an antidote to caste. Her outcast characters free themselves from the caste-imposed binaries of high and low, and touchable and untouchable to some extent, but still remain entangled in a situation that is far from ideal because the pro-brahminic state and dominant brahminic culture can always invisiblize them. Whereas anti-caste politics is necessary, it also has its limits. Full immersion in anti-caste politics, without looking for alternative forms of engagement, gives Brahminism, and even Brahmins, undue importance which in effect fuels caste ideology, and thus may do more harm than good. To avoid such pitfalls, Roy's outcast characters look beyond anti-brahminic politics and develop a praxis that involves, to use Judith Butler's terms, "actions, sustained labor, and institutionalized practice" (2004, 204), and thus acknowledge that the very idea of social reform or change presupposes the participation of its members, irrespective of their caste status.

Although my thesis demonstrates how caste affects sexual minorities, Dalits, and other marginalized groups through the examination of various texts, I have been constantly looking for the newest sources and most recent debates concerning caste, and particularly its intersection with sexuality, to ensure that my research findings and conclusions are as current as possible. Two recent events that took place during the Covid-19 pandemic have brought in sharp focus the central tenet

of my thesis—that is, the powerful hold of caste and heteronormativity on dominant brahminic culture. One involves the suicide of a high-profile Indian actor Sushant Singh Rajput, and the other concerns the government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the vast Indian populace. Briefly, I will comment on these two events to highlight the complex ways in which caste and caste's interface with sexuality govern present-day India. What I am examining through the reading of literary, historical, and religious texts has taken concrete shape through the everyday lived reality during the pandemic.

On June 14, 2020, 33-year-old Indian actor Sushant Singh Rajput committed suicide in Mumbai. He was upper-caste**,** educated, and the only and youngest brother of five sisters from a small town in the northern state of Bihar. Some speculated that he was under acute depression and that the lockdown had further worsened his mental health, leading him to commit suicide. Many people—including a few credible and well-known celebrities—not only strongly objected to "the depression theory," but blamed the industry's heavyweights for pushing Rajput to suicide (Kangana Speaks 2020). They claimed that since Rajput was an outsider and had achieved immense success, many in the industry were threatened and turned against him, which made him commit suicide. Within days of his suicide, incensed online India initiated a protest movement called "Justice for Sushant Singh Rajput."[164] While India under lockdown saw a surge in coronavirus cases as well as serious border disputes with China, mainstream India was fixated with Rajput's case (Daniyal 2020). Several key investigating agencies were roped in to probe the case. All sorts of speculation circulated on the internet. Many extrapolated his death to be a murder. Strangely, all those who were asking for justice were seeing themselves as nationalists, trying to defend the damage done to a 'suitable-boy' or a Rama-like figure. Those few who supported the depression theory or referred to his death as suicide were bullied as they were perceived as anti-Rama and thus anti-brahminic and anti-national, including the local police and Rajput's doctor. To quench the collective, brahminic demand, the media endlessly interrogated film stars, politicians, police officers, and Rajput's staff members. Overnight, many random, predominantly upper-caste YouTubers were appearing on national television after concocting baseless theories insisting that Rajput's death was a murder. Even though the case was stalled, an angry country was convinced that Rajput's suicide was an intentional killing, and it wanted to punish someone for Rajput's alleged murder.

Attention turned toward Rajput's girlfriend, Rhea Chakraborty, a 28-year-old actress and daughter of a retired army officer who was accused of Rajput's death by millions of online users.

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[164] The week Sushant Singh Rajput died, he received 11.5 million views on the internet, surpassing the page views that Prince, David Bowie, Kobe Bryant, and Stephan Hawking received after their deaths, as well as page views received by Donald Trump upon his election after 2016.

While she fully cooperated with investigating teams, the mainstream media had already declared her a murderess. In September, she appeared on national television and stated that the media were hounding her because she was a woman. Soon afterward, she was given a non-bailable jail sentence which pacified the collective conscience of online upper-caste Indians: She was charged with procuring drugs for Rajput and for consuming soft drugs with him.

The case began to take a strange shape. The Rama-like figure, whom India was mourning, was emerging as a drug addict, whereas the popular media was intent on denouncing Rhea Chakraborty (see, Asthana 2020, paras. 6-10). Since Rhea Chakraborty was not Rajput's wife, but was in a live-in relationship with him, she drew immense hostility. Also, six days prior to Rajput's suicide, she had left him (Chakraborty 2020, n.p.). In contrast to their misogynistic response to Rhea Chakraborty, commentators, fans, ordinary people, even politicians, and Rajput's colleagues, ex-girlfriends, and friends had only good things to say about him. Leading journalist Shobha De, who often refers to herself as a conservative Maharashtrian Brahmin woman, wrote virulent articles against Rhea Chakraborty that were coterminous with other misogynistic articles and TV shows that called her names like "gold digger, sex bait, *vishkanya* and *dayan*" (Asthana 2020, para. 4). Commenting on an interview that Rhea Chakraborty gave, after months of cooperating with investigating agencies, to a leading channel to clarify her position, De called Rhea Chakraborty's defense "a polished performance," adding that "her lines rolled off smoothly, while her eyes maintained a laser-like, piercing hold on the anchor. Rhea was very much on top of her game, and aced each question. She picked up on key points and held forth aggressively like she was a senior counsel in the Supreme Court, squashing a weak opponent" (2020, para. 2). De condemned Rhea Chakraborty for speaking up. However, Chakraborty's anger against media lynching seemed justified when she was later acquitted by the court. Many De-like hostile denunciations surfaced on various media platforms revealing a kind of brahminic anger that upper-caste communities adopt toward disruptive women. Like women in Narayan's and Roy's novels who are punished for crossing the *Laxman Rekha*, Rhea Chakraborty too is seen as transgressive: She was in a live-in relationship with Rajput and not married to him, she left him when he needed her, and she spoke about his mental health, drug addiction, and other unpleasant family matters, thus supposedly denigrating Rajput who is posthumously seen as a Rama-like figure. Throughout this episode, voices against Rhea Chakraborty outnumbered those that were supporting her and campaigning for a fair investigation. The media scrutiny and violence that Rhea Chakraborty faced resemble the punishments that the *Manusmriti* expounds for transgressive women.

Numerous conjectures have been offered but no one had discussed Rajput's case from a queer perspective. In his interviews, he talked about issues of loneliness, alienation, and lack of

friends in ways that recall narratives of closeted gays. When he was 16, he lost his mother. Later, as a successful actor, he recalled, "There was a vacuum in my life after her as she was the only one with whom I would discuss everything" (quoted in Arora 2020, para 12). In 2015, he said, "Everybody is in a hurry to decode you in a certain way, and then they expect you to adhere to their definition. How can they possibly do that when you yourself are finding it hard to discover yourself" (quoted in Singh 2015, para. 10). The brahminic impulse to mold him in a certain way, his own struggle to figure himself out, and also the loss of his mother become life and death issues in queer lives. Even when facing deaths that are connected to queerness, the decedents' families, friends, colleagues, and the media narrate them in ways so that, as with the problem of untouchability, they do not have to deal with the issue of diverse sexualities, and thus retain their caste-induced coherence.[165]

Rajput's everyday life indicates his personal struggle with living in "a certain way" that goes against societal norms. Rajput had a staff of five to seven men, all younger than he, who lived around the clock with him in his flat in a posh Mumbai suburb. Rajput seemed exceptionally close to Rhea Chakraborty's brother. A few months before he died, they all spent a holiday together in Europe. Rhea Chakraborty mentioned that her brother was like her *souten* (co-wife), which suggests that Rajput shared a special bond with him. My point here is not to prove that Rajput was gay or to speculate on the nature of his relationship with his girlfriend's brother, but to point out that while numerous disparate theories were offered to explain as to the reasons for his death, no one came up with a question such as: Could Sushant Singh Rajput's depression and ultimate suicide potentially be connected to homosexuality? Also, can we infer that the media's utter refusal even to speculate about such a possibility indicates its collective homophobia? Had Rajput left a suicide note declaring his inability to come to terms with his homosexuality, would civil society have demanded justice for Rajput with a similar fervor? In the Indian film industry, it is predominantly actresses who commit suicide, sometimes leaving notes naming people who pushed them to the act.[166]

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[165] On May 27, 2014, two female cousins, aged 14 and 16, from a backward caste were found hanging on a tree in the Katra village, near Delhi. This became the second highest-profile rape and murder case after the 2012 Nirbhaya Delhi rape case. The girls' family accused five members of the Yadav family—an influential local caste community—of committing rapes and murders. Because of contradictory witnesses and systemic inefficiencies, the investigating agencies took three years to conclude that the girls committed suicide. The media discussed this case from every possible angle, but only within a heterosexual framework. Nobody linked their joint suicide to homosexuality or that they may have been lovers. For more, see Falerio (2021).

[166] In recent years high profile actresses Parveen Babi (1954-2005) and Sridevi (1963-2018) died in highly questionable circumstances, but nothing followed their deaths, although both these actresses have been far more bigger stars than Rajput. Jiah Khan (1988-2013), an upcoming actress, committed suicide and left behind a detailed note blaming her actor boyfriend for her suicide (Haworth 2017). Popular media frequently tends to connect suicides of actresses to greed, ambition, mental illness, alcoholism, depression and, above all, to their lack of character.

However, the dominant media and institutions rarely react to such suicides with the same kind of frenzy shown in Rajput's case.

However, Rajput's case and the societal response to it mirror another high-profile murder case akin to Rajput's, both cases underscoring the centrality of caste politics in Indian life. This other case involved an upright Parsi Navy officer Kawas Manekshaw Nanavati, his English wife Sylvia Nanavati, and her lover Prem Bhagwan Ahuja, a rich Sindhi bachelor. Commander Nanavati lived with his wife and three children in the exclusive Mumbai's Malabar Hill neighborhood, thus cutting an ideal figure of the family man. While Rajput was a suitable boy in the making, Nanavati was the epitome of the suitable Indian boy. In Nanavati's absence, his wife had started an affair with Ahuja. She was so besotted with Ahuja that she told her husband about her love affair, who said nothing to her, but later, went to Ahuja's apartment and shot him—it was April 27, 1959. Despite Nanavati's crime, public opinion was in his favor because he was perceived as the Rama-like figure, who had been wronged by a promiscuous figure like the unmarried Ahuja who damaged the ideal brahminic family "by seducing a married woman while her husband sailed the seas in defense of the nation" (Prakash 2010, 162). The media painted Ahuja as "an immoral playboy who habitually threw parties, where he plied women with liquor" (179). Writing about the Nanavati case 58 years later in her book *In Hot Blood* (2017), Bachi Karkaria recounts the aspects of a suitable boy in Nanavati's story, suggesting the powerful grip of the epics on the culture (204, 218). While Nanavati is narrated as maryada purushottam Rama and his wife Sylvia as Rama's dutiful wife and thus both as prototypical brahminic figures (10, 27, 192), Ahjua is portrayed, and accepted, as a demonic figure. Allusions to the *Ramayana* surface in the primary sources Karkaria cites as well as when she interprets the case in the contemporary context (205).

Unlike present-day India with its pro-brahminic Hindutva politics, the dominant political establishment in post-war India, when the world was eager to embrace left-liberal, anti-imperial values, adopted similar values to engage with the world, but without really relinquishing its caste structures. The so-called left was seen as progressive; the right as pro-caste and thus regressive. However, caste runs through them both. In the former group it was subtle and unacknowledged but in the latter, dominant and explicit**.** Despite these radically different politics, caste drove both. Newspapers and magazines, especially *Blitz*, portrayed Nanavati as a victim although he was a killer. Nehru's dominant socialist government wanted to save Nanavati, but the conservative parties viewed Nehru's politics as anti-brahminic remotely controlled by Washington (Prakash 2010, 166-167) and thus, anti-Indian. Irrespective of these political battles, "[e]very time [Nanavati] was spotted going in and out of the court, accompanied by naval officers, the crowd would shout 'Nanavati Zindabad!' (Long Live Vatican) and 'good luck' " (184). Both the anti-brahminic

Nehruvian politics of the past and the pro-brahminic Hindutva politics of the present are obsessed with over Rama-like figures. Nanavati and Rajput acted in volatile ways, yet the upper-caste media insisted on narrating them as strong, heterosexual, and brahminic, thus revealing the centrality of caste, veiled to itself.

In Nanavati's case, however, the media did not say anything about his wife. Perhaps, they did not expect an English woman to be virtuous like Sita. Like Rajput's, Nanavati's case was framed, discussed, and narrated in strictly pro-brahminic ways. Any anti-brahminic perspective such as bringing up the issue of sexuality was shunned in the same way upper-caste communities circumvent the question of caste. In court, Sylvia Nanavati said, "My husband came and touched me. […] I asked him not to touch me as I do not like him" (178). On being asked by the defense counsel why she did not like him, she replied, "At that time I was infatuated with Ahuja" (178). Only in retrospect and after she knew she was duped into sexual intimacy did this mother of three call her serious love affair an infatuation. The media ignored Sylvia Nanavati's visceral dislike for her husband—"I do not like him" and "I do not want to be touched by him"—and whitewashed her already dysfunctional marriage by demonizing Ahuja (179). By not probing her life and personal aspirations and by quickly accepting that she was tricked into adultery by Ahuja, the narrative surrounding the Nanavati case deflected the question of female sexuality and female desire, revealing how little female desire matters in traditional brahminic culture.

Every new article on Nanavati's case came up with a more sensational headline. One that appeared frequently was the "Tragedy of the Eternal Triangle" (176) or "the Case of the Eternal Triangle" (195-196). The 'third' in this triangle was represented as an anti-brahminic figure whereas the couple, Nanavati and his wife, were cast as Rama-and-Sita-like figures, embodying "patriarchal and patriotic values" (200). The assiduous energy that went into the construction of the 'third' as demonic so that a coherent brahminic couple could emerge also revealed the disturbing or queer power of the 'third.' Could it be that Nanavati was homosexual, trying to play the role of an ideal, masculine man, losing all self-control when he heard about his wife's affair with another man? Strikingly, unlike heroes in fiction, he did not kill his wife but went on to kill his wife's lover, as if avenging the dishonoring of his daughter, mother, or sister**.** He may even have been acting with the rage of a spurned lover who resented Ahuja for choosing his wife—not him. All such speculation, including in Rajput's case, never entered the mainstream discussion in any form even though reams have been written about both these cases. Nanavati killed a man, whereas Rajput killed himself, and in both cases, dominant upper-caste communities wanted to protect these Rama-like figures. Such selective responses and staged reactions toward issues of sexuality and gender reveal how firmly dominant socio-cultural norms are embedded in caste.

In contrast to Sylvia Nanavati, Rajput's upper-caste girlfriend**,** Rhea Chakraborty, is treated like a pariah. Her vilification indicates the conditional position of upper-caste women and even of transgressive men like Ahuja in caste constellations. If they transgress caste norms they lose their caste position. Also, the division over Rajput's suicide and over Nanavati's murder case into two brigades revealed the complete absence of non-brahminic people from the debate. Those who wanted to punish someone for Rajput's assumed murder are seen as patriotic Indians and thus the pro-caste order. Those who questioned the nationwide hysteria over framing Rajput's suicide as murder and the witch-hunt of his girlfriend are perceived as anti-India, and thus anti-caste. Such division and marking of people as pro- and anti-India, as good and evil, remain firmly rooted in the upper-caste domain, which recalls the depiction of both good and evil in brahminic texts like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata.* Simply put, massive petition campaigns for Nanavati by the left-liberal, anti-caste Nehruvian government in the 1950s and similar aggressive mass campaigns for Rajput by the right-wing, ultra brahminic Modi government in 2020 reveal how radically divergent politics in their effects are shaped by caste and reinvigorate caste.

As I demonstrated in this thesis, post-colonial theory, Western queer theory, and queer theory that focuses on India have been either misused or used in pro-brahminic ways. We see a similar pattern in the way in which the Indian government has handled the Covid-19 pandemic. Prime Minister Modi asked people to come out on their balconies and ring bells to salute the health workers (India Today 2020, para. 3). Unlike most mainstream journalists who were busy leading a "Justice for Sushant Singh Rajput" campaign, Barkha Dutt, a trailblazing journalist who covered the entire country during the lockdown, claimed that Western measures such as social distancing were "a purely theoretical concept," and while appropriate for the West, could not work in many places in India (Dutt 2020, para. 9). The government, according to Dutt, did not consider the impact of the lockdown on the millions of poor people; it only considered the interests of a select population that it perceived as its legitimate populace. Like Dutt, Arundhati Roy noted how the Indian government's handling of the pandemic, by default, had revealed to the world its indifference to structural inequality and suffering.

> The lockdown worked like a chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated hidden things. As shops, restaurants, factories and the construction industry shut down, as the wealthy and the middle classes enclosed themselves in gated colonies, our towns and megacities began to extrude their working-class citizens—their migrant workers—like so much unwanted accrual. (Roy 2020, 208-209)

While all this was happening, brahminic media described the huge number of Indian laborers who were heading to their villages from the cities as "migrant" workers, as if India's poor were not its citizens[167] (Abhishek 2020; Samaddar 2020; Wankhede 2020).

The current brahminic indifference towards the impoverished and toward other social outcasts such as Untouchables is not new but goes back to ancient Indian texts such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata.* The three novels discussed in this thesis show how this collective brahminic indifference toward non-brahminic and outcast communities surfaces in a mild form in Narayan's *The English Teacher* and with increasing brutality in Roy's novels *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The pandemic has only highlighted this indifference. Brahminic obsession with defending upper-caste men like Rajput and Nanavati and brahminic hostility toward all those who question this collective obsession are connected to the epistemology of caste. The drama that we saw in the wake of Rajput's case was essentially staged by upper castes; its participants recall the 'good' and 'bad' characters of the *Mahabharata* who remain firmly embedded in the brahminic domain. Untouchables do not appear even as villainous characters.[168] Contemporary brahminic indifference or violence only mimics Sanskritic texts that sanction violence against non-brahminic Others. Unlike other civilizations, in Indian myth, history, and literature, both its heroes and its demonic anti-heroes are predominantly brahminic, reflecting the extent of the erasure of the non-brahminic populace.

Based on Sanskrit religious texts and Hindu iconography, the subject of present-day literary and visual depictions continues to be predominantly brahminic.[169] The modern versions of archetypes of the Sacrificial Victim, the Epic Hero, the Tragic Hero, and the Martyr remain in the brahminic domain, thus constructing the world as brahminic by blocking the figure of the Untouchable from appearing in any form. The literary texts that I have discussed throughout my thesis and the recent developments that have taken place under the Covid-19 pandemic suggest an answer to the question with which I began: "Is caste the engine that runs India?" Caste is the engine

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[167] In April 2021, when the second wave of coronavirus infections hit India and affected both rich and poor alike, the tenor of the discourse was different. The government was called into question and people began demanding a solution in real time, but this intensity of collective rage had been lacking during the first wave (March-May 2020) that predominantly affected the poor (see Mander 2020). Unlike the traditional media focus on taking long shots of "migrant" workers fleeing cities, now the media shows the human face of the pandemic by telling individual stories of people who lost their parents or friends to the virus.

[168] In Hindu epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, heroes and villains are of brahminic castes. In the *Ramayana*, Lord Rama stands lower in the caste hierarchy than the demonic Ravana who is a learned Brahmin. Likewise in the *Mahabharata*, both the 'good' and the 'bad' characters are upper caste.

[169] When graphic artist Karan Acharya, known for his depiction of various Hindu gods, represented Rama, the resultant graphic went viral on Twitter because his version of Rama resembled Sushant Singh Rajput.

that runs India in all of its dimensions: literary, economic, religious, digital. Caste is everywhere and continues to be the central governing force in India.

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Statement of Own Work

§ 7. Abs. 4 Promotionsordnung

Hiermit versichere ich, alle Hilfsmittel und Hilfen angegeben und die Arbeit auf dieser Grundlage selbstständig verfasst zu haben. Die Arbeit ist nicht schon einmal in einem früheren Promotionsverfahren angenommen oder abgelehnt worden.

I hereby confirm that I have indicated all resources and aids and that I have independently written the thesis on this basis. The dissertation has not been accepted or rejected in an earlier doctoral procedure.

28 October 2021