

Copyright  
By  
Alexandra Lynn Barron  
2005

The Dissertation Committee for Alexandra Lynn Barron  
certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

Postcolonial Unions: The Queer National Romance in Film and Literature

Committee:

---

Lisa Moore, Supervisor

---

Mia Carter

---

Janet Staiger

---

Ann Cvetkovich

---

Neville Hoad

Postcolonial Unions: The Queer National Romance in Film and Literature

by

Alexandra Lynn Barron, B.A.; M.A.

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

the University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2005

For my mother who taught me to read and made sure that I loved it.

## Acknowledgments

It is odd to have a single name on a project that has benefited from so many people's contributions. I have been writing these acknowledgments in my head since I began the project, but now that the time is here to set them down I am a bit at a loss as to how to convey how truly indebted I am. To start, I would like to thank Sabrina Barton, Mia Carter, Ann Cvetkovich, Neville Hoad, and Janet Staiger for their insights, for their encouragement, and for teaching me what it means to be an engaged scholar. Lisa Moore has been a teacher, a writing coach, a cheerleader, and a friend. She approached my work with a combination of rigor and compassion that made this dissertation far better than it would have been without her guidance. I could not have done this without her.

I have been lucky enough to find colleagues in my program who have inspired, encouraged, and supported me throughout this process. Ellen Crowell, Jeanette Herman, Casey McKittrick, Sue Mendelsohn, Vim Pasupathi, and Ashley Shannon have each saved my life in various ways on occasions too numerous to mention. Liz Brenner, Jess Olive, Kyre Osborn, and Kerry Shehan have always been there to remind me that there is a world outside of school and have remained my good friends despite years of listening to my graduate school angst. I thank them all.

My family continued to believe that one day I would finish this thing I was writing and did not keep asking when that would be even though they must have wondered. For that I thank Anath Garber, Karina Barron, Michael Barron, Eugene Barron, and Janice and Stephen Knauth. I am especially grateful to my grandparents Ray

and June Evers who made graduate school much easier than it would have been without their help. I wish my grandfather had lived to see me graduate but I take comfort in the fact that he had enough faith in me to know that I would finish.

Although she still maintains that she was not sure I would graduate high school, my mother, Susan Evers, is the person who is most responsible for me receiving my Ph.D. She gave me my love of stories and she also taught me, through her example, the pleasure of education for its own sake.

Finally, I would never have been able to complete this project without Camile Pahwa who put up with me throughout, helped me through the worst spots, gave me some of the better ideas contained within, and is simply my favorite.

Postcolonial Unions: The Queer National Romance in Film and Literature

Publication No. \_\_\_\_\_

Alexandra Lynn Barron, Ph.D.  
The University of Texas at Austin, 2005

Supervisor: Lisa Moore

In my dissertation I investigate how romance functions both generically and ideologically in texts depicting same-sex unions. I argue that the novels and films in this study use the romantic union as a way of intervening in discussions about what constitutes citizenship. While the national romance has often obscured legitimate conflicts and oversimplified complex political debates, I contend that these queer romances can persuade audiences to re-imagine the nation in new ways. For instance, the film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) allegorizes the nation via a same-sex couple and uses the generic conventions of the romance to position audiences to desire a union between groups in conflict. Consequently, it creates a fantasy of an inclusive kind of citizenship that it presents as possible and appealing. Thus, besides drawing attention to the romance's political potential, my project contributes a new generic term—the queer national romance—to the lexicon of literary and film studies.

The national romance emerged in the eighteenth century as a literary genre in which star-crossed lovers from opposing nations—usually an imperial power and its colony—marry, healing the conflict between their respective communities. I argue that this narrative form found new life in queer postcolonial fiction and film in the late twentieth century. Like traditional national romances these texts solicit affective identification on the part of the spectator and negotiate a specific historical and cultural struggle, conflict, or anxiety about the status of the nation or the identity of the national citizen; but instead of centering on a heterosexual couple these texts focus on same-sex romantic unions. My study is the first to identify the national romance at work in texts depicting same-sex unions, and it illustrates their potential to make space in the national imaginary for queer citizens. Moreover, I am the first to argue that the national romance can work in both politically progressive and reactionary ways. Beyond intervening in literary debates about the national romance, I contribute to a growing body of work that examines the interconnections between nationalism, sexuality, and transnationalism, all the while grounding these theoretical issues in concrete discussions of genres.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Queer Unions, Transnational Citizens.....	1
1: The Queer National Romance Defined: Fantasies of Union in <i>My Beautiful Laundrette</i> and <i>The Crying Game</i> .....	32
2: Imperial Cruising: National Romance and National Melancholy in <i>The Swimming- Pool Library</i> .....	74
3: Impossible Unions: <i>Funny Boy</i> and the Queer National Romance that Isn't.....	126
4: The Female National Romance: <i>Fire</i> 's Queer Anti-Communalism.....	176
Conclusion.....	230
Works Cited.....	234
Filmography.....	244
Vita.....	247

## Introduction: **Queer Unions, Transnational Citizens**

Where the political terrain can neither resolve nor suppress inequality, it erupts in culture. Because culture is the contemporary repository of memory, of history, it is through culture, rather than government, that alternative forms of subjectivity, collectivity, and public life are imagined.<sup>1</sup>

We need to know where we live in order to imagine living elsewhere. We need to imagine living elsewhere before we can live there.<sup>2</sup>

When we first see the laundrette referred to in the title of Hanif Kureishi and Stephen Frears' film, it is anything but beautiful. Like the other settings in *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), the establishment's dinginess and dilapidation are central to the film's critique of the grim economic realities of Margaret Thatcher's England.<sup>3</sup> But the film's protagonists, the lovers Johnny and Omar, soon transform the space as they smash walls; cover graffiti with pastel paint; and bring in plants, music, and light. Although other locations in the film continue to be depicted in a mode of gritty realism, everything inside the laundrette registers as fantasy. The interior's bright colors, dramatic lighting, and non-diegetic bubbly soundtrack alert us to the difference between the film's two visual and narrative styles. *My Beautiful Laundrette* uses the relationship between the two lovers—a British-born, middle-class Pakistani and an ex-National Front, working-class white punk—to create an allegory of Thatcher's England that unites some of the nation's most disparate groups: blacks and whites, the rising middle class and the working class, and the racist and the immigrant. However, the union between Johnny and Omar cannot actually bridge the divides separating them in a realist narrative. Kureishi and Frears, therefore, blend realism with fantasy, creating a hybrid work that demonstrates the

potential of the queer romance to re-imagine the nation. One of the primary reasons for the film's widespread popularity, I argue, is its decision to queer the national romance; the catharsis audiences experience as painful rifts are healed in a love story helped to make *My Beautiful Laundrette* one of the most successful British films of the decade.

The national romance emerged in the eighteenth century as a literary genre in which star-crossed lovers from opposing nations—usually an imperial power and its colony—marry, healing the conflict between their respective communities. I contend that this narrative form found new life in queer postcolonial fiction and film in the late twentieth century. By creating a national romance with a same-sex couple at its center, *My Beautiful Laundrette* inaugurated the genre I call the queer national romance. These films include *The Crying Game* (1992), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Fire* (1996), *Aimee and Jaguar* (1999), and *Borstal Boy* (2001).<sup>4</sup> They join novels such as *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), *Funny Boy* (1994), and *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001) in creating a space for queer revisions of the national romance.<sup>5</sup> Like traditional national romances these texts solicit affective identification on the part of the spectator and negotiate a specific historical and cultural struggle, conflict, or anxiety about the status of the nation or the identity of the national citizen, but instead of centering on a heterosexual couple these texts focus on same-sex romantic unions. Thus, my study contributes a new generic term—the queer national romance—to the lexicon of literary and film studies while drawing attention to texts in which old notions of citizenship based on heterosexual lineage give way, in the new transnational context, to an expanded definition of the global citizen as desiring subject.

In this project I look closely at a number of key texts that were watershed moments in the development of the queer national romance, particularly in terms of their reception: *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *The Crying Game*, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, *Funny Boy*, and *Fire*.<sup>6</sup> Each chapter is a case study that focuses on a text or a pair of texts and balances readings with careful attention to the political and historical struggles in which the texts attempt to intervene. I situate the texts within the literary traditions or film industries in which they participate, taking into account their reception in various sites. As I look at each work, I ask several questions: How does this text address its audience? What narrative devices, rhetorical strategies, and stylistic and formal conventions does it use to solicit affective responses? And in what ways are these affective responses being used to construct or trouble a national subject?

I began this project unsure whether the texts I was looking at function as a genre or are more accurately described as a subgenre or even a production cycle. What are the stakes in defining the queer national romance as a genre? What does it allow and what does it limit? In this study I describe how the texts I examine share a particular set of conventions, but I pay just as much attention to how they differ from one another in terms of narrative and cinematic conventions as well as how they borrow from other genres. What is gained, then, by drawing these texts together and calling them a genre? Film scholar Andrew Higson points out that “it is one thing to gather together a group of films and give them a collective name. It is another thing to justify that process of grouping and naming.”<sup>7</sup> I grouped these films and novels together in order to draw attention to the popularity of the queer national romance as a mode of narrating contentious political struggles. Moreover, categorizing these texts as belonging to a single genre and looking

at them together enables me to counter two incorrect critical assumptions. First, I challenge beliefs that the romance is trivial and apolitical by examining the way it can work affectively on audiences and be used to intervene in highly charged political discussions. Second, I argue that although these queer romances may look radical on the surface because of their implicit critique of homophobia, they can be deeply reactionary texts.

Choosing texts from very different national sites and looking at both film and literature enables me to draw conclusions about how the queer national romance functions as it crosses geographic and media boundaries. Chapters One and Two focus on texts about England and Northern Ireland, while the third and fourth chapters turn to South Asia, looking at a film set in India and a novel by a Sri Lankan exile. The contrasts between a former colonizer (England), two formerly colonized nations (India, Sri Lanka), and a nation that is still occupied by a colonizing force (Northern Ireland) illuminate how the national romance functions in very different situations. Yet the shared post-imperial context provides a framework within which to discuss constructs of colonialism, nationalism, and sexuality. My choice of texts also allows me to investigate how the queer national romance changes as it shifts from film to literature. While the films I examine conform to the parameters of the queer national romance, the novels in this study employ some conventions of the genre and reject others. Although novels comment on, repeatedly allude to, and even borrow some of the genre's conventions, they do not, ultimately, tell their stories as queer national romances. In this study, then, *The Swimming-Pool Library* and *Funny Boy* allow me to discuss how the novel complicates the queer national romance and how these novels in particular critique the genre.

Sketching out some basic differences between film and literature can help to explain why so many more filmmakers than novelists choose to structure their texts as queer national romances. From Hollywood to Bollywood, the heterosexual romance features prominently in the majority of films regardless of their genre or national context. In their influential study of Hollywood films during the studio era, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson discovered that 95 percent of these films incorporated heterosexual romance as at least one storyline and it was the main plot in 85 percent of the films.<sup>8</sup> Recent studies have demonstrated the prevalence of the romance in the 1980s and 1990s in films from the United States and Indian movies from the Bombay industry where heterosexual romance is the main line of action in almost every film.<sup>9</sup> These cinematic traditions inform *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *The Crying Game*, and *Fire*; thus, it is not surprising that they tell their stories as romances, albeit same-sex romances.<sup>10</sup> Contemporary fiction, in contrast, relies more on modernist or postmodernist narrative structures than on any of the literary genres that tell stories of nation-building through romances. As I consider each text, I look carefully at the literary and cinematic precedents it responds to and analyze the generic and narrative innovations each text makes. Thus I develop a genealogy, of sorts, of the genre.

In this project, I analyze how the texts I study use representations of romantic union to intervene in discussions about what constitutes citizenship. At their most visionary, these texts contest homophobic nationalisms and revise imperial fantasies of domination, re-imagining citizenship in radical new ways. I argue that since the nation itself is an imagined community—a kind of collective fantasy—these texts are able to do real work by having audiences invest in the fantasies they construct.<sup>11</sup> However, the queer

national romance can work in similar ways to the national romance, a form which has been criticized for legitimizing inequality. Mary Louise Pratt describes this danger in an examination of the interracial romance in her landmark study *Imperial Eyes: Travel*

*Writing and Transculturation:*

It is easy to see transracial love plots as imaginings in which European supremacy is guaranteed by affective and social bonding; in which sex replaces slavery as the way others are seen to belong to the white man; in which romantic love rather than filial servitude or force guarantees the willful submission of the colonized. . . . In the transformation a fundamental dimension of colonialism disappears, namely, the exploitation of labor. . . . The allegory of romantic love mystifies exploitation out of the picture.<sup>12</sup>

Here Pratt discusses interracial love stories that appear in European travel writings from the late eighteenth century, but other critics have noticed a similar tendency to “mystify exploitation” in different kinds of texts that tell their stories as romantic unions between opposing political forces. Despite its queering of the genre and its setting in postcolonial contexts, the queer national romance is not exempt from portraying inequality as love. Some national romances—heterosexual or queer—mask legitimate political struggles by resolving them in a romance narrative. In this dissertation, I argue that the ideological work a particular national romance is able to do is determined in part by which aspects of the traditional romance that it borrows. While some texts adopt the genre’s most regressive conventions—masking exploitation or delegitimizing political conflict in the union of lovers—others employ its more subversive elements and use allegory to create inclusive, new visions of the nation and its constituents.

A brief comparison between *My Beautiful Laundrette* and another popular film, Neil Jordan’s *The Crying Game*, reveals both the limitations and possibilities of the queer national romance as a narrative strategy. As I demonstrate in my first chapter, *My*

*Beautiful Laundrette* borrows from the medieval romance's convention of depicting an ideal world—in this case by imagining an England free from racial and class divides inside the fantasy of the laundrette. *The Crying Game*, on the other hand, erases the very real political conflict between England and Irish nationalists that keeps its lovers apart initially, thus fulfilling literary critic Doris Sommer's fear that the national romance's "pretty lies" can paper over legitimate conflicts.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, *The Crying Game* illustrates a potential danger of queer national romances featuring male lovers: they may construct an exclusionary and in this case misogynist allegory in which women are expelled from the narrative and, by implication, from the national union envisioned. The contrast between these two films, therefore, cautions us against embracing all texts that seek to insert a queer subject into the national imaginary.

In what follows, I situate my project within current discussions occurring in the field of transnational queer studies. I then focus in generically and briefly examine some characteristics of the romance that are significant to my argument. In the next section, I trace the national romance and describe its relationship to the queer national romance. I close by summarizing my chapters.

### **Transnational Queer Criticism**

In recent years, the intersection between transnationalism and queer sexuality has become a popular site of investigation in both GLBT and postcolonial studies. Between 1997 and 2001, for instance, special issues of a number of journals including *Social Text* and *GLQ*, and anthologies such as *Queer Diasporas* and *Post-colonial, Queer* took this intersection as their focus.<sup>14</sup> Recent publications include another anthology, *Queer*



*Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, and two eagerly awaited full-length studies: Martin Manalansan's *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* and the forthcoming *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* by Gayatri Gopinath.<sup>15</sup> Queer transnational work defines itself as interdisciplinary. Scholars draw from anthropology, literary studies, and cultural studies, among other fields, often blending strategies from various disciplines. Consequently, there is no one archive that they share. The texts they examine are as varied as a Catholic ritual enacted by Filipino gay men in New York City, Salman Rushdie's novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*, and the testimony of a gay Palestinian-Israeli man about his identifications and desires.<sup>16</sup> As well as drawing from diverse archives, researchers also come from various ideological perspectives. As Manalansan, one of the first scholars to do this kind of work points out, "The transnational turn in lesbian, gay, and queer studies has not produced a singular mode of inquiry."<sup>17</sup> Below I will trace a few of the major trends in current queer transnational work, highlight some of the major contentions in the field, and situate my project within these larger discussions.

In contrast to earlier work in GLBT studies, new scholarship focuses on the impact transnationalism and globalization have had on sexualities in various sites and not on excavating pre-colonial, indigenous queer sexualities. One of the aspects of transnationalism that they explore is what happens when different constructions of sexuality interact, and a significant portion of this research therefore interrogates the effects of the spread of Western gay culture.<sup>18</sup> While a number of critics fear that the Western GLBT movement is a colonizing force that will erase local same-sex constructions of identity, others counter this view pointing out the hybridization that

seems to occur between local sexualities and transnational influences including Western gay and lesbian movements.<sup>19</sup> For example, in an article about gay identities in China,

Lisa Rofel argues:

Thus Chinese gay men index neither another exemplar of global gay identity nor mere local particularity. Transcultural processes of gay identification shape the contours of cultural citizenship in China for gay men; conversely, desires for cultural belonging shape the way in which gay men in China construct the meaning of transcultural practices of sex, desire, and sexual identities.<sup>20</sup>

In an ethnography of Filipino gay men living in New York, Manalansan describes the men he studies as “neither heroes of a triumphant story of queer liberation nor... dupes or victims of perpetual displacement, cultural forlornness, or oppression.”<sup>21</sup> Manalansan’s work, like Rofel’s, demonstrates how those with same-sex desires or identities are agents who appropriate, resist, and negotiate differing constructions of sexuality. Similarly, in this study I trace the various constructions of identity that mesh and inflect one another in the texts I explore.

Challenging the notion that same-sex desire is a Western, European, or colonial import is another prominent theme in queer transnational work. This particular homophobic assumption, Gaurav Desai reminds us, can be found in the influential nationalist position articulated by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* where he associates homosexuality with racism and claims that there is no indigenous tradition of homosexuality in Africa.<sup>22</sup> While earlier generations of queer scholars countered the common understanding of same-sex desire as Western with descriptions of native homosexualities, critics today disrupt the assertion in different ways.<sup>23</sup> Both Gaurav Desai and Jarrod Hayes, for example, argue that *heterosexuality* and not homosexuality is the colonial construct, noting the ways in which colonialism attempted to eliminate particular

forms of homosexuality.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Desai points out, laws making sodomy illegal in many former colonies date from British rule. In this framework, then, homosexuality can be seen as resistance to colonialism. Hayes elaborates this idea, tracing an alternate history of queer political movements that originates not with Stonewall, but with the poetry of gay Algerian nationalist Jean Senac. Neville Hoad also addresses how we narrate GLBT struggles and how those struggles are viewed in nationalist discourses. In an article that reads two different cartoons which depict Robert Mugabe and Nelson Mandela in drag as Marie Antoinette, Hoad examines the different political and cultural attitudes towards homosexuality in South Africa and Zimbabwe and writes, “the question still remains why in some national contexts lesbian and gay human rights can be incorporated into the sphere of the national, whereas in others they must be repudiated as antinational.”<sup>25</sup> As Hoad argues, constructing GLBT movements as human rights struggles, an accepted discourse in many postcolonial nations, can potentially enable GLBT activists to align with nationalist struggles rather than be seen as Western or colonizing.

One of the newest approaches to issues of transnationalism and sexuality takes queer diasporas as its focus. Scholars who study queer diasporas contribute an emphasis on movement and travel to the field as they investigate migrations of texts, practices, and people. In their introduction to *Queer Diasporas* Benigno Sánchez-Eppler and Cindy Patton assert the following:

When a practitioner of “homosexual acts,” or a body that carries any of many queering marks moves between officially designated spaces — nation, region, metropole, neighborhood, or even culture, gender, religion, disease — intricate realignments of identity, politics, and desire take place.<sup>26</sup>

Tracing the journeys of these bodies, texts, and discourses enhances our understanding of both sexuality and globalization as their movements challenge the boundaries of the

nation. Literary critic Gayatri Gopinath has developed and expanded theories of queer diaspora by centering her own analyses on the representation of queer female diasporic subjects.<sup>27</sup> Gopinath looks at popular cultural texts from across the South Asian diaspora (including *Fire* and *Funny Boy*), and uses them to discover new ways communities are being imagined. Instead of reifying blood ties and heterosexual reproduction as many theories of diaspora do, Gopinath reveals the existence of collectivities that are constructed in other ways, for instance through shared affinities for particular forms of popular culture. Her work focuses on texts from a variety of different genres that all share a South Asian diasporic status and thus expand our understanding of diasporas. My study, in contrast, primarily investigates one genre and looks at texts that come from a number of different national and diasporic contexts.

This project contributes to queer transnational studies by adding an emphasis on genre in general and romance more specifically. By tracing the contours of a single genre as it travels through various national and transnational contexts and across media, I expand the scope of queer diasporic studies. And, in the process, I develop a model other transnational queer genre critiques can follow. My model demands that we attend to a genre's literary and colonial legacy, examine its potential to suggest new ways of understanding contemporary negotiations of sexuality, and discuss how it circulates and functions in different contexts. In terms of queer national romance, the particular genre I study, my work is valuable because it draws attention to the increasingly frequent use of the same-sex union as a metaphor for citizenship. I believe that many more queer films from postcolonial contexts will narrate their stories following the formula I describe here as they attempt to capitalize on its accessibility and familiarity.

Three other critics have investigated same-sex desire as a metaphor for colonial or postcolonial relations. Richard Dellamora looks at nineteenth-century novels that imagine English citizenship through the lens of male friendship rather than blood connection, but the authors he examines shy away from constructing these relationships as romances.<sup>28</sup> Christopher Lane also explores male unions and homoerotic desire in British literature; however, he argues that the interracial homosexual unions he looks at *disrupt* imperial allegories rather than create them.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps Raz Yosef's work on representations of interracial sex in Israeli cinema comes closest to my project.<sup>30</sup> Yet while Yosef highlights the prevalence of the trope of interracial sex between Israelis and Palestinians on screen and even focuses on the frequent depictions of homoerotic or homosexual desire, he is uninterested in genre. In his study, Yosef traces images of sex, not generic conventions or romances between characters. Thus, my work benefits from these studies but extends their scope, broadening to include postcolonial texts and adding a generic emphasis. Moreover, mine is the first study to include an analysis of the female national romance. Consequently, I am the first to demonstrate that the national romance featuring two women can not only challenge homophobic nationalisms but also invoke and rebuke communalism.

### **Romance, National Romance, and Queer National Romance**

Romance takes many forms: the medieval romance, Shakespearean romance, the gothic novel, film melodrama, and even the much-maligned romance novel are only a few of its manifestations. Despite the diffuseness of the term, we can trace some continuities from the medieval romance to many of its later incarnations. I would like to

draw attention to four related characteristics of what Gillian Beer calls the “romance impulse” which are especially important to my project.<sup>31</sup> First, the romance in all of its manifestations has always been a form of popular culture. Second, many types of romances retain aspects of the allegorical nature of the medieval romance. Third, romances often depict an ideal and thus seek to instruct audiences as well as entertain. And, finally, manifestations of romance solicit a particularly intense affective relationship between the reader and the text. Some elaboration of these characteristics will help to explain why the romance is such a powerful tool with which to imagine unions across or among nations.<sup>32</sup>

In the Middle Ages the term “romance” referred to literature written in or translated into the vernacular as opposed to literature in Latin that only the educated could read.<sup>33</sup> Despite their function as popular literature Beer claims that romances do more than just entertain: “because Romance shows us the ideal it is implicitly instructive as well as escapist.”<sup>34</sup> This ideal the romance creates—the green world of the medieval romance for instance—often functions as allegory, and characters in many of these forms may be types rather than fully-developed characters. Thus, argues Beer, manifestations of romance often depict a society’s deepest held beliefs and its greatest fears. Accordingly she contends that romance is a form that can express the conflicts of an age in transition particularly well.

Other critics lend credence to the claim that romance is a genre that reflects social transitions. Northrop Frye argues that the romance works as a form of wish-fulfillment where the social or intellectual ruling class projects its ideals.<sup>35</sup> In addition, he asserts that the romance is inherently a “more revolutionary form than the novel” because

the novel attempts to depict characters who are eventually integrated into a stable society whereas the romance deals with individuality. Frye believes that, no matter how conservative the author, in the romance “something nihilistic and untamable is likely to keep breaking out of his pages.”<sup>36</sup> I disagree with the stark distinction Frye makes between the romance and the novel and would argue that some novels retain features of the romance. I agree, however, with his emphasis on the revolutionary potential of the romance. Geraldine Heng makes some observations about the romance that lend specificity to Frye’s more general claims. In a discussion of the medieval romance that addresses characteristics it passes on to later romances, Heng argues that the romance as a form is first and foremost a response to crisis.<sup>37</sup>

Among the genre’s objects of attention are crises of collective and communal identity—the identity of the emerging medieval nation of England, or of pivotal racial groups, or even of Latin Christendom—as well as pressing economic, military, religious, and social conundrums of different kinds.<sup>38</sup>

According to Heng, medieval romance centers around crises related to group identification. In my study I will trace later genres descended from the medieval romance that share this tendency to narrate or contest communal affiliation in a romance narrative.

One of the most significant features of the otherwise disparate texts descended from the romance is how they invite readers or viewers to enter them imaginatively and to believe in the world they construct. Critics often use the language of “surrendering” to the romance and being “transported” by it. Since the eighteenth century, various manifestations of the romance have been accused of seducing the reader and arousing passions, “offer[ing] him a kind of fairy world which will unfit him (or more frequently her) for common life after he has sojourned there.”<sup>39</sup> These criticisms continued late into the twentieth century when feminists like Germaine Greer called romance fiction “the

opiate” of women.<sup>40</sup> It is this intense relationship created between the reader and the text that makes the romance particularly effective at enlisting support for various agendas.

Doris Sommer asks,

What better way to argue the polemic for civilization than to make desire the relentless motivation for a literary/political project? To read on, to suffer and tremble with the lovers’ drive toward marriage, family, and prosperity, and then to be either devastated or transported in the end, is already to become a partisan.<sup>41</sup>

The queer national romances I look at in this project “transport” audiences and influence partisan minds and hearts, but their drive is not towards marriage or family. A group of texts, however, does this quite explicitly and it is to this group I now turn.

Although the queer national romance is a new genre, it has its roots in a much older literary tradition. Literary critics Doris Sommer and Lisa Moore have discussed the nation-building potential of the romance in their studies of nineteenth-century Latin American “foundational fictions” and the eighteenth-century Irish national tale.<sup>42</sup> Both Sommer and Moore argue that the texts they analyze employ the romantic union of two star-crossed lovers who represent conflicting racial, religious, class, or regional interests as an allegory of the nation. These romantic and sexual unions represent legislative and political unions that the texts support, for example the Act of Union between England and Ireland in 1800. More than just serving as allegory, however, the texts Sommer and Moore discuss affectively work on their audiences as they position readers to invest emotionally in the successful union of the hero and heroine, a union which is depicted as inevitable and natural but is delayed by the characters’ allegiances to competing interests. These texts’ ability to solicit the audience’s emotions and deploy them in support of a particular vision of the new nation makes them integral to the project of nation-building. By examining how each of the texts they study seeks to mobilize audiences in support of



a particular national agenda, both critics convincingly demonstrate “the inextricability of politics from fiction in the history of nation-building.”<sup>43</sup>

In my work I am concerned with a different type of union, what Moore calls those “other kinds of love” that are often seen as threats to the nation because they encompass queer desires. They are a threat because, as M. Jacqui Alexander argues,

The nation has always been conceived in heterosexuality, since biology and reproduction are the heart of its impulse. The citizenship machinery is also located here, in the sense that the prerequisites of good citizenship and loyalty to the nation are simultaneously sexualized and hierarchized into a class of good, loyal, reproducing heterosexual citizens, and a subordinated, marginalized class of non-citizens.<sup>44</sup>

Although the nation may be imagined as heterosexual, it is also always anxiously policing its sexual borders because it knows that this construction of citizenship is open to challenge. The romances I examine counter that construction as they replicate, with a crucial difference, the model Sommer describes of two lovers who represent disparate interests that need to converge. In this dissertation, I consider what happens to a narrative when the romance is between two men or two women, and yet the story still uses the trope of star-crossed lovers representing two different interests or communities who will inevitably unite.<sup>45</sup> As I look at each text and the historical and political context from which it emerges, I ask: How do these queer texts intervene in national debates over who counts as a proper member of the nation? How does their representation of sexuality intersect with other identity-forming discourses like nationality, race, and colonialism? And, if the model of romance is predicated on a heterosexual union that produces future citizens, then what changes in terms of production/reproduction of both social fantasy and political subjects when we look at queer romance instead?

Although the trope of union can promote radically different agendas, both Sommer and Moore illustrate how it often masks or contains inequalities existent in the nation by resolving them in the romance narrative. Sommer hypothesizes, “It is possible the pretty lies of national romance are similar strategies to contain the racial, regional, economic, and gender conflicts that threatened the new Latin American nations.”<sup>46</sup> Moore makes a similar yet farther-reaching claim when she notes how a particular text “show[s] us the limitations of a narrative that mystifies the relationship between love of country and erotic love, a mystifying gesture that remains prevalent and problematic today.”<sup>47</sup> The national romance has the ability to work in the service of particular nationalisms as they attempt to erase or hide legitimate conflicts within the nation, yet the queer national romance does not necessarily work in the same obfuscating way. Instead, it can be used to rewrite constructions of the nation and work through rather than erase the conflicts embodied in the lovers’ union.

The twentieth-century nationalisms in which my texts seek to intervene have significant differences from those of the “foundational fictions” Sommer discusses and the pro-Act of Union texts Moore examines. While their work focuses on nations that were being formed or re-formed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, my texts all emerge from postcolonial nations in the late twentieth century facing the various challenges that come with a long history of colonial domination—underdevelopment; continued economic dependence on foreign powers; militant nationalisms that repress racial, sexual, and ethnic difference; and the effects of global capitalism. Despite this radical shift in context, the national romance has proven itself to be a genre that can travel and still function powerfully. Today, however, it is frequently employed to criticize

particular constructions of the nation and imagine a new and different citizen. For instance, in place of exclusionary communalist understandings of the nation modeled on the heterosexual union of Ram and Sita in the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, Deepa Mehta's *Fire* envisions female lovers as an allegory for an inclusive Indian nation. The ideal citizen *Fire* depicts is female and queer, and although she is Hindu, she shares a belief in a secular India. Thus, these texts reveal, the queer national romance can challenge, disrupt, and recreate national boundaries and contest homophobic and homogenizing constructions of citizenship.

This project is, at its heart, an exploration of the remains of imperial desire and how these remains surface in postcolonial film and literature. More specifically, I examine postcolonial critiques of the literary strategy that narrated the British Empire as a mutually beneficial, loving relationship between nations and masked the exploitation of colonial subjects by depicting them as willing participants in these relationships. While many current studies explore imperial desire, and some even investigate queer colonial desires, none take as their focus the use of romance as a means of narrating Empire.<sup>48</sup> This project seeks to correct that omission by tracing the permutations of the national romance, a popular form of colonial allegory in contemporary film and fiction. In what follows, I sketch out a brief description of how the colonial allegory is figured through the national romance and the queer national romance in the twentieth century.

## Queer National Romance and Colonial Allegory

Hanif Kureishi locates part of *My Beautiful Laundrette*'s success in the United States in its reliance on the theme of "a passionate blood-brotherhood," a staple in American film and literature:

We wonder why the film has done so well in the U.S. It's partly, I think, because of its theme of success at any price; and partly because the puritan and prurient theme of two outcast boys (outcast from society and having escaped the world of women), clinging together in passionate blood-brotherhood is a dream of American literature and film from *Huckleberry Finn* to the work of Walt Whitman and on to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.<sup>49</sup>

Yet *My Beautiful Laundrette* is doing more than just repeating a common theme of American literature; it is drawing on the sexual metaphor to create a national or colonial allegory—a tradition with many variations and a long history. Film historian John Hill documents three different configurations of the romance as colonial allegory in British literature and film: the West as male and East as female; the East as male and West as female; and both participants as male.<sup>50</sup> According to Hill, the way the colonial encounter is allegorized depends on the political situation it seeks to represent. The first configuration—the West as a man and the East as a woman—is the most common, and it is frequently used in narratives of conquest.<sup>51</sup> The second configuration is seen more often at a later stage in a colonial project, possibly after decolonization has begun, and expresses "a shift from concern over how [a colony] will be ruled to how it will be experienced."<sup>52</sup> Finally, Hill suggests that the male/male homosocial couple depicts an "ironic attitude towards imperial relations."<sup>53</sup> The romance as colonial allegory has been analyzed in other national contexts as well. For instance, according to Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, the colonial allegory functions in two primary ways in Irish literature and film—either with the colonizer as the desiring male and the colonized as the female

object of desire or with men representing both colonizer and colonized. She traces the heterosexual form of the colonial allegory from its origins in the nineteenth-century melodramas of Dion Boucicault to the twentieth-century dramas of George Bernard Shaw, Brian Friel, and Anne Devlin, and to the screen in David Lean's *Ryan's Daughter* (1971). In contrast to Hill's description of the colonial allegory as a romance between two people, the texts Cullingford describes tell the story of an English man competing with an Irish man for the love of an Irish woman. As these examples illustrate, then, various configurations of the national romance occur and each reveals a different projection of the ideal nation. In my study, I pay careful attention to the way each love story is constructed and explore the ideological consequences of choosing to narrate a story as a romantic triangle, a union between two lovers, or a series of failed unions.

While Hill and Cullingford look at texts primarily from the mid-twentieth century, the national romance remains a popular way of narrating conflicts between rival groups, particularly on screen. In Ireland, for instance, *A Love Divided* (1999) tells the true story of a Catholic man, his Protestant wife, and a conflict that arises in their community over the education of their children.<sup>54</sup> The national romance even appears in such unlikely places as the social realist *Bloody Sunday* (2002), a documentary-style film which includes a sub-plot about a Protestant teenage girl who loses her Catholic boyfriend in the massacre.<sup>55</sup> Contemporary Indian films also frequently employ the conventions of divided lovers to tell stories of regional, caste, or class divides. It was not until Mani Ratnam's controversial *Bombay* (1995), however, that a communal divide was narrated as a national romance. *Bombay* sets its romance between a Hindu man and a Muslim woman against the backdrop of the communal riots in 1993.<sup>56</sup> Anti-colonial Indian films such as

*Lagaan* and *1942: A Love Story* also narrate their stories, at least in part, as national romances.<sup>57</sup> Most recently, the film *Veer-Zaara* (2004) tells the story of a Pakistani woman and an Indian Air Force pilot who fall in love and are tragically separated only to be reunited years later.<sup>58</sup> The film's director, Bollywood legend Yash Chopra, is quite explicit that the film is his attempt to heal the wounds of Partition and that the love story is the vehicle best-suited to achieve this feat. The national romance, these Irish and Indian examples suggest, often emerges from sites where actual partitions have rent the fabric of the nation.<sup>59</sup>

Although most national romances ostensibly tell stories of heterosexual love, a relationship between two rival men occurs in many of the stories featuring narrative triangles. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, the woman acts as a conduit through which the men play out their desires for each other.<sup>60</sup> Sedgwick uses Gayle Rubin's articulation of the traffic in women—the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men—to clarify her argument.<sup>61</sup> Making visible how the woman in a text may “function as a conduit,” Sedgwick claims,

draw[s] the “homosocial” back into the orbit of “desire,” of the potentially erotic, [and] hypothesize[s] the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted.<sup>62</sup>

Some writers and filmmakers exploit the homoerotic subtext of the genre by creating stories in which the desire between men is openly acknowledged. The union between men is useful as a political allegory, Cullingford argues, because, “Only the love between men can adequately symbolize political equality: heterosexual love signifies asymmetries of power between men and women.”<sup>63</sup> Heterosexual unions can work well to represent

power imbalances and many texts do figure social differences as gender differences, but Cullingford's argument raises a number of questions: What about the class, racial, and ethnic distinctions that create inequalities between men—how do these other facets of identity function in these texts? Furthermore, if gender equality does signify political equality, why not construct a national romance between two women? In order to fully understand how the trope of the same-sex national romance works, a more thorough analysis of its features is necessary. In my dissertation I look carefully at a number of queer national romances and texts which comment on the queer national romance, taking into account what kinds of love stories each constructs and what types of union each advocates.

The tradition of depicting the union between two nations (or two disparate groups within the nation) as a *male* couple has its most famous example in the relationship between Aziz and Fielding in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*.<sup>64</sup> Although the two men are devoted to one another and much of the novel reads as a muted romance between them, in the end they cannot be together. Forster uses the thwarted relationship between Aziz and Fielding to advance an alternative model of imperial relations—one that is based on mutual respect and love—and he critiques abuses perpetuated by the British in India, though he does not go so far as to argue against Empire itself. Furthermore, while Forster uses the national romance to make an argument about Empire, he stops short of naming the romantic union as such. Texts like *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *The Swimming-Pool Library* draw on this homoerotic tradition of the colonial allegory; however, they also subvert it by bringing what remains only a subtext in Forster's narrative into the foreground. While *A Passage to India* is the obvious antecedent to the

queer national romance and many postcolonial national romances explicitly engage with its homoerotic version of Empire, Forster's romance is colonial and homoerotic unlike the texts I look at, which are explicitly postcolonial and homosexual.<sup>65</sup>

While the queer national romance creates unions that challenge the homophobia of nationalist movements, this does not guarantee that their work will not perpetuate other inequalities. Cullingford argues,

Narratives of homosocial or homosexual bonding between English and Irish males may function to obliterate women except as objects of exchange between men, or they may appropriate "feminine" qualities while demonizing real females; frequently they challenge Republican nationalism. Strategies of resistance do not necessarily inhabit the same counter-hegemonic space, and the interests of men who love men do not always coincide with those of women or nationalists.<sup>66</sup>

We see this demonization of women in many of Neil Jordan's films—especially in *The Crying Game*'s portrayal of Jude. Moreover, many critics have noted that the humanist message of that film serves to critique Republicanism. Thus the texts I look at challenge some inequalities while upholding others. I would amend Cullingford's argument by adding that narratives of homosocial or homosexual bonding do not necessarily work even in the interests of men who love men. While gay authors like Irish playwright Frank McGuinness use the queer national romance to challenge Republican homophobia and imagine a space in the nation for gay men, other writers and filmmakers may have different goals in mind.<sup>67</sup> Jordan, for instance, is not interested in gay or transgender political struggles and uses queer characters only as a titillating backdrop for his story of the reformation of an Irish nationalist.



## Chapter Summaries

Each chapter of this dissertation looks at a particular text or pair of texts that reveal a new aspect of how the queer national romance works. My first chapter defines the queer national romance more precisely as I look at *The Crying Game* and *My Beautiful Laundrette*, two films from the genre's infancy. I move from texts that define to one that critiques the genre in my second chapter where I argue that *The Swimming-Pool Library* is an analysis of the queer national romance itself. The third chapter investigates *Funny Boy*, a novel that appears to use the genre as a way of narrating civil war but then abruptly shifts genres. I end with an exploration of *Fire* which allows me to investigate what happens when the queer national romance is constructed with two women.

Chapter One, "The Queer National Romance Defined: Fantasies of Union in *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *The Crying Game*" lays the groundwork for my study by establishing a focus on the formal characteristics of a text and the political and ideological consequences these narrative choices have. *The Crying Game*'s decision to tell its story through narrative triangles which result in the expulsion of characters whose identities are deemed problematic and its erasure of the political struggles it purports to discuss illustrate the genre's most regressive characteristics. *My Beautiful Laundrette*, on the other hand, employs the medieval romance's depiction of an ideal world to create a fantasy space in which the nation's painful divides are healed without suggesting that a romance can actually mend these ruptures. Through the contrast between these two films, I establish the genre's potential to re-imagine the nation as well as its ability to shut down rather than generate debate.

My second chapter, “Imperial Cruising: National Romance and National Melancholy in *The Swimming-Pool Library*,” shifts the discussion of the national romance from film to literature and demonstrates that the novel as a form is more likely than film to critique the national romance. In this chapter, I argue that Alan Hollinghurst’s controversial novel refuses the traditional narrative of reconciliation the national romance provides in its union of lovers. Instead, *The Swimming-Pool Library* uses a series of failed romances that span the century to highlight the imperial dynamics present in almost all facets of British culture—dynamics, it argues, that were still alive and well in the 1980s when the novel was written. I argue that the novel uses these failed romances to create a kind of national melancholy. While some critics say we should mourn Empire and move on, Hollinghurst and the proponents of new understandings of melancholy call for a less fixed relationship to the past, and search for clearer understanding of the legacies of past moments and their impact on the present.

Chapters Three and Four move the project from the British metropolis to the South Asian diaspora. In Chapter Three, “Impossible Unions: *Funny Boy* and the Queer National Romance that Isn’t,” I turn my attention from an explicit critique of the national romance to a hybrid novel that blends a number of different genres. I argue that Shyam Selvadurai’s novel, like *My Beautiful Laundrette*, contrasts scenes of communal violence and displacement with scenes of love, positioning us to desire a new, more inclusive Sri Lanka. Yet the nation it desires and represents in the love between two boys exists only in the past; the queer national romance cannot narrate the brutal communal riots that have swept the country for the past twenty years. In the end, then, Selvadurai turns away from romance and creates a new form by mixing the exile narrative and the diary in what he

calls a “riot journal,” thus illustrating one boundary of the queer national romance. The queer national romance, the novel suggests, cannot adequately represent communal riots because it suggests a consolation that flies in the face of the trauma.

In contrast to earlier chapters’ attention to texts featuring male unions, Chapter Four, “The Female National Romance: *Fire*’s Queer Anti-Communalism,” considers what happens when national reconciliation is narrated through the union of two women. This chapter examines Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* and the controversies it engendered in India, where extremist Hindu nationalist groups vandalized theaters showing the film. Rather than focusing on the film’s reception as other critics do, I return to the text itself and argue that studies limited to reception fail to acknowledge its scathing critique of fundamentalism and its subtle exploration of communalism. I contend that *Fire* critiques the misogyny inherent in much nationalist rhetoric—and visible in the fundamentalist response to the film’s depiction of lesbian sexuality—and demonstrates that national romances depicting female unions potentially contest both fundamentalism and communalism.

I would like to end this introduction by returning to a feature of the medieval romance that continues in many of its current incarnations. Geraldine Heng has described romance as a “resourcefully accommodating cultural medium” where “historical phenomena and fantasy may collide and vanish, each into the other, without explanation or apology, at the precise locations where both can be readily mined to best advantage.”<sup>68</sup> This characteristic, she claims, is not limited to the medieval romance, but is “a prime characteristic of romance that persists henceforth.”<sup>69</sup> Like the medieval texts Heng examines, the queer national romances I investigate intervene in historical crises. The

texts in this study do this by creating romantic unions through which they re-imagine new alignments of nations and people. What follows is my attempt to expand our understanding of the link between history and cultural fantasy in texts which demonstrate new ways of imaging communities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lisa Lowe, quoted in Jigna Desai, *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996), 5.

<sup>3</sup> *My Beautiful Laundrette*, DVD, directed by Stephen Frears (Orion Classics, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> *The Cr*

*ying Game*, DVD, directed by Neil Jordan (Miramax, 1992); *The Wedding Banquet*, DVD, directed by Ang Lee (Samuel Goldwyn Co., 1993); *Fire*, DVD, directed by Deepa Mehta (Zeitgeist Films, 1996); *Aimee and Jaguar*, DVD, directed by Max Farberbock (Zeitgeist Films, 1999); *Borstal Boy*, DVD, directed by Peter Sheridan (Strand, 2000). Two other films that might be productively explored in conjunction with these texts are *Y tu mamá también* (2001) and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001). *Y tu mamá también*, DVD, directed by Alfonso Cuarón (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2001); *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, DVD, directed by John Cameron Mitchell (Killer Films, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (New York: Vintage, 1989); Shyam Selvadurai, *Funny Boy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1994); Jamie O'Neill, *At Swim, Two Boys* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Two texts that share the post-imperial context of the texts I examine but that were not watershed moments and thus currently fall outside the scope of this project are *Borstal Boy*, the film based on Irish poet Brendan Behan's memoirs, and Jamie O'Neill's fascinating novel about the Easter Rising, *At Swim, Two Boys*. If I were to expand the project I would certainly include an analysis of them, perhaps in conjunction with *Funny Boy*, another coming of age/coming out story.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama Since 1980* (London: Oxford UP, 2003), 9. Higson goes on to argue in favor of loose genre definitions: "All genres and cycles are, in fact best understood as loose, leaky, hybrid categories, drawing on a variety of influences, building on an eccentric range of sources, references, and representational practices, filmic and otherwise. Each film is the product of its particular historical conditions of existence, each cycle or genre emerges as it evolves, constructing its own terms of reference, its own intertexts."

<sup>8</sup> David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), 16.

---

<sup>9</sup> On romance films in the 1980s and 1990s see Peter Evans and Celestino Deleyto, *Terms of Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and 1990s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998) and Catherine Preston, "Hanging on a Star: The Resurrection of the Romance Film in the 1990s," in *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon (Albany: SUNY UP), 227-243. On Indian film and romance see Jyotika Viridi, *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Films as Social History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> To be sure, other cinematic traditions influence them as well including both the British and Irish film industries. As I discuss each film, I will examine all of the traditions it relies on.

<sup>11</sup> I refer here, of course, to Benedict Anderson's description of the nation as an imagined community. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 97.

<sup>13</sup> Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> Philip Brian Harper, Anne McClintock, Jose Esteban Munoz, Trish Rosen, eds., "Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender," *Social Text* 52-53 (Fall/Winter 1997); George Chauncey and Elizabeth A. Povinelli, eds., "Thinking Sexuality Transnationally," *GLQ* 5, no. 4 (1999); Cindy Patton and Benigno Sanchez-Eppler, eds., *Queer Diasporas* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000); John C. Hawley, ed., *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections* (New York: SUNY P, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan IV, eds., *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism* (New York: New York UP, 2002); Martin F. Manalansan IV, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003); Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Manalansan, *Global Divas*; Hema Chari, "Colonial Fantasies and Postcolonial Identities: Elaboration of Postcolonial Masculinity and Homoerotic Desire," in *Postcolonial, Queer*, ed. John C. Hawley, 277-304 (Albany: SUNY P); Sumaka'i Fink and Jacob Press, "Walid," in *Queer Diasporas*, ed. Cindy Patton and Benigno Sanchez-Eppler, 263-280 (Durham: Duke UP, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Manalansan, *Global Divas*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> I refer to "Western" and "non-Western" nations because these terms are used consistently in the literature; however, this terminology is limited because of its inability to describe the complexities of nations. Just as we must trouble the definition of "Western," we also should interrogate any claim of a monolithic GLBT culture. At the same time, it is important to recognize that even though there is no one form of Western GLBT culture many similarities exist between queer identities in Western European nations, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Disseminated through international gay media, marches like Stonewall 25, and, especially, the Internet, this culture is often dominated by organizations originating in the United States.

<sup>19</sup> Dennis Altman takes the former position and was the first to raise many of these concerns, while the best articulation of the latter position can be found in Martin

---

Manalansan's writing. Dennis Altman, "Global Gaze/ Global Gays," *GLQ* 3 (1997): 417-36; Altman, *Global Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Manalansan, *Global Divas*.

<sup>20</sup> See Lisa Rofel, "Qualities of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities in China," *GLQ* 5, no. 4 (1999), 453.

<sup>21</sup> Manalansan, *Global Divas*, xi.

<sup>22</sup> Gaurav Desai, "Out in Africa," in *Postcolonial, Queer*, ed. John C. Hawley (Albany: SUNY P, 2001). 146.

<sup>23</sup> William Spurlin, "Broadening Postcolonial Studies/Decolonizing Queer Studies: Emerging 'Queer' Identities and Cultures in Southern Africa," in *Postcolonial, Queer*, ed. John C. Hawley, 185-206 (Albany: SUNY P, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Jarrod Hayes, "Queer Resistance to (Neo-)colonialism in Algeria," in *Postcolonial, Queer*, ed. John C. Hawley, (Albany: SUNY P, 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Neville Hoad, "Between the White Man's Burden and the White Man's Disease: Tracking Lesbian and Gay Human Rights in Southern Africa," *GLQ* 5, no. 4 (1999): 565.

<sup>26</sup> Sanchez-Eppler and Patton, 3.

<sup>27</sup> See for instance her forthcoming study *Impossible Desires*.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Dellamora, *Friendship's Bonds: Democracy and the Novel in Victorian England* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Lane, *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> Raz Yosef, "Homoland: Interracial Sex and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Israeli Cinema," *GLQ* 8, no. 4 (2002): 553-579.

<sup>31</sup> Gillian Beer, *Romance* (London: Methuen, 1970).

<sup>32</sup> The texts in my study draw on various romance traditions that emerge from different cultural traditions. In my chapters I will attend to these influences which range from the medieval romance to the Hindu epic romance the *Ramayana*. It is worth remembering however that the romance is a form that cannibalizes from various cultural traditions and even "Western" romances draw on *The Arabian Nights*, the *Ramayana*, and Muslim *ghazal* love poetry to name just a few sources.

<sup>33</sup> Beer, 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957), 304-305.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003).

<sup>38</sup> Heng, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Beer, 14.

<sup>40</sup> Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York: Bantam, 1972). While some other feminists agreed with Greer, many countered this view. Janice Radway's landmark study, for example, argues that the act of reading romances registered women's dissatisfactions with marriage and patriarchy while at the same time providing an escape from these

---

realities. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1991).

<sup>41</sup> Sommer, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Lisa Moore, "Acts of Union: Sexuality and Nationalism, Romance and Realism in the Irish National Tale," *Cultural Critique* 44 (Winter 2000): 113-144. See Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997) for discussions of the national romance in the North American context.

<sup>43</sup> Sommer, 75.

<sup>44</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander, "Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of State Practice in the Bahamas Tourist Economy," in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty, 63-100 (New York: Routledge, 1997), 84.

<sup>45</sup> *Fire* is the one text I examine which depicts a romance between two characters from the same class, ethnicity, and religion. I include the film and consider it a national romance because it uses Radha and Sita's union to make an argument for the healing of two estranged communities: Hindus and Muslims.

<sup>46</sup> Sommer, 92.

<sup>47</sup> Moore, 151.

<sup>48</sup> For discussions of imperial desire see Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990); Joseph Boone, "Vacation Cruises: or, The Homoerotics of Orientalism," *PMLA* 110, no. 1 (January 1995): 89-107; Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995); Philip Holden and Richard J. Ruppel, eds. *Imperial Desire: Dissident Sexualities and Colonial Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003); Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>49</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid: The Screenplay and the Screenwriter's Diary* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 84.

<sup>50</sup> John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s: Issues and Themes* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1999), 106.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>54</sup> *A Love Divided*, DVD, directed by Sydney Macartney (BBC, 1999).

<sup>55</sup> *Bloody Sunday*, DVD, directed by Paul Greengrass (Granada Television, 2002).

<sup>56</sup> *Bombay*, DVD, directed by Mani Ratnam (Amitabh Bachchan Corporation, 1995).

<sup>57</sup> *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India*, DVD, directed by Ashutosh Gowariker (Eros, 2001); *1942: A Love Story*, directed by Vidhu Chopra (Eros, 1993).

<sup>58</sup> *Veer-Zaara*, film, directed by Yash Chopra (Yash Raj Films, 2004).

<sup>59</sup> In an outstanding analysis of partition in literature and film, Joe Cleary discusses what he calls the "romance-across-the-divide" in the Irish national context. Cleary, *Literature, Partition and the Nation State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002).

<sup>60</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 26.

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, "Gender, Sexuality and Englishness in Modern Irish Drama and Film," in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, ed. Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, 159-186 (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1997), 165.

<sup>64</sup> E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1924).

<sup>65</sup> For more on Forster and representations of both queer desire and colonialism see Robert K. Martin and George Piggford, eds. *Queer Forster* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997).

<sup>66</sup> Cullingford, 181.

<sup>67</sup> See, for instance, his play "Carthaginians" in *Frank McGuinness: Plays One* (London: Faber, 1996).

<sup>68</sup> Heng, 2.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.



## 1. The Queer National Romance Defined: Fantasies of Union in *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *The Crying Game*

In 1985 Hanif Kureishi and Stephen Frears collaborated to make *My Beautiful Laundrette*, a film about a young British-Pakistani man and his white, working-class boyfriend that became one of the most successful British movies of the decade.<sup>1</sup> *My Beautiful Laundrette* uses the story of the two lovers to create an allegory of Margaret Thatcher's England that unites some of the nation's most disparate groups: blacks and whites, the rising, entrepreneurial middle class and the working class, and the racist and the immigrant. One of the primary reasons for the film's popularity, I will argue, is its use of the national romance and its decision to queer this familiar genre. With this choice, *My Beautiful Laundrette* inaugurated the international cycle of films that I call the queer national romance. This chapter looks back at two films from the infancy of the genre, and illustrates that, then as now, films depicting gay unions do not necessarily work in politically progressive ways. The two films I focus on in this chapter, *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *The Crying Game*, are the most popular, influential and, indeed, notorious antecedents to more recent queer national romances such as *Fire* and *Borstal Boy*.<sup>2</sup> Comparing *My Beautiful Laundrette* to *The Crying Game* reveals both the limits and possibilities of using the queer national romance as a narrative strategy and offers ways of assessing the cultural work performed by more recent examples of the genre.

As I mentioned in my introduction, the ideological work a particular national romance is able to do—the type of nation it is able to persuade its audience to imagine—is determined in part by which facets of the traditional romance it borrows. In this chapter, I examine the political consequences of certain formal strategies using *My*

*Beautiful Laundrette* and *The Crying Game* as case studies. I argue that *My Beautiful Laundrette* relies heavily on the romance's depiction of an ideal world to imagine a more inclusive, utopian nation. *The Crying Game*, on the other hand, falls victim to the major pitfall critics have noted about the national romance: it erases the very real political conflict that initially keeps its lovers apart. Moreover, *The Crying Game* creates a particularly misogynist allegory in which women are expelled from the narrative and, by implication, from the nation the film imagines. This film illustrates a potential danger of queer national romances featuring male lovers: the possibility that they may be incapable of advocating for a space for women in the actual nation. While many readers may be moved to celebrate the queering of the national romance as a gesture towards inclusivity, the contrast between these two films cautions us against embracing all texts that seek to insert a queer subject into the national imaginary. We must first ask what kinds of nations are these films envisioning.

By positioning audiences to desire the romance it constructs between Johnny, a white working-class punk, and Omar, a middle-class British-born Pakistani, *My Beautiful Laundrette* makes us want the union of the disparate elements these characters represent. Yet the film never loses sight of the fact that the romance it depicts promises only a *fantasy* of healing and that it cannot actually bridge divides in a realist narrative. In fact, it documents the racist violence that occurs outside the fantasy space of the laundrette in graphic detail. The film thus blends a realist style with fantasy, creating a hybrid work that demonstrates the potential of queer romance to re-imagine the nation. *The Crying Game* also imagines a healing of disparate factions—in this case, the Irish and the English—in two different romances. While the relationship between Fergus, an IRA

operative, and Jody, the British soldier he captures, challenges nationalist homophobia, the subsequent romance between Fergus and Dil, a black British transvestite, participates in a number of problematic representational traditions. Although at first glance it seems to be telling an original story with a novel take on postcolonial Irish identity, *The Crying Game* borrows some regressive conventions from the traditional national romance that illustrate the potential dangers of the queer national romance as a narrative strategy. Following a classic literary and cinematic formula, the hero evolves via his encounter with “the Other.” The film creates a liberal humanist ideal of tolerance that masks very real political struggles by resolving them in the romance. While *My Beautiful Laundrette* consistently dramatizes that the world inside the laundrette is provisional and fragile, a fantasy, *The Crying Game* is presented solely in a realist mode. The latter film’s unselfconscious creation of a world where conflicts are resolved in romance creates a dangerous distortion of history as it oversimplifies the nationalist and feminist struggles, and transgender and racial politics, it references.

In what follows, I treat each film in turn, moving from its production history to reception to textual analysis. I begin with *My Beautiful Laundrette* to establish the potential of the queer national romance as a narrative strategy that can move audiences to re-imagine the nation and conclude with *The Crying Game* as a cautionary tale about the limitations of the genre.

### ***My Beautiful Laundrette: A Counter-Fantasy of England***

British films... have been rather successful in marketing and packaging the national literary heritage, the war years, the countryside, the upper classes and elite education, and in doing so have also succeeded in constructing and circulating quite limiting and restricting images of ‘britishness.’<sup>3</sup>

Popular British film and television of the 1980s such as *Brideshead Revisited* (1981), *Chariots of Fire* (1981), and *A Passage to India* (1984) depicted a particular set of characteristics implicitly defined as British.<sup>4</sup> As Thomas Elsaesser points out, these representations are often focused on the upper classes and set in country homes and public schools. Through consistently reproducing narrow criteria, Andrew Higson argues, a national cinema “privileges a limited range of subject positions which thereby become naturalized or reproduced through the work of cinema itself as the only legitimate positions of the national subject.”<sup>5</sup> By privileging a particular class, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or even temperament, films create an image of who is British, an image that excludes other subject positions. *My Beautiful Laundrette*, however, constructs a decidedly different picture from mainstream British cinema in the 1980s. In contrast to period pieces like *Chariots of Fire*, state-of-the-nation films like *My Beautiful Laundrette* portray the unemployment, class tension, and racist violence so prevalent in Thatcher’s England. And, in fact, Kureishi and Frears have stated that they constructed these aspects of *My Beautiful Laundrette* as an explicit attempt to intervene in the contemporary political situation and to contest Thatcher’s conservative policies and rhetoric.

*My Beautiful Laundrette* was produced during a time of national crisis in Great Britain. Massive unemployment, a rise in fascist organizations like the National Front, and a subsequent rise in violence against people of color created an anxiety around definitions of Britishness that though not new was certainly intensified during this period. This anxiety was heightened by the Thatcher regime’s constant attempts to construct British identity narrowly by excluding both racial and sexual minorities—rhetorically and

sometimes legislatively—from its vision of the nation. *My Beautiful Laundrette* responds to these concerns as it depicts England in the 1980s as a place of widespread unemployment and complex racial and class tensions, including those which arose from the existence of a growing black middle class. However *My Beautiful Laundrette* does more than merely reflect the social and cultural moment out of which it emerges; it constructs Omar and Johnny’s relationship as an allegory through which communities in conflict are united in the figure of a romantic union. Yet rather than naïvely assuming a romance can actually bring about a bridging of divides, the film creates the laundrette as a space where it abandons realist conventions and depicts a fantasy of unity. This unreal space with its bright colors and tropical aesthetic stands in contrast to the gray streets, racist punks, and urban squalor outside, and it is in this space where the romance between Johnny and Omar thrives. As the film positions the audience to desire this romance, it likewise positions them to yearn for the union of disparate elements Johnny and Omar represent into one unified image of the national subject. In this way, the film gives audiences a romance which heals the divides threatening the nation at that moment, yet retains its believability and sustains a political critique by acknowledging that this world could only exist in fantasy. The target of *My Beautiful Laundrette*’s political critique is Thatcherism.

Although Thatcherism is usually remembered primarily in terms of its economic impact, Anna Marie Smith argues that the Conservative Party’s social policies and nationalist rhetoric were just as influential.<sup>6</sup> It is through this nationalist rhetoric that Thatcher constructed a British subject based on exclusion. In a 1978 speech, for example, Thatcher refers to what she calls the “natural” fears “the British” had about their country

being “swamped” by people from the “New Commonwealth.”<sup>7</sup> In her rhetoric, Thatcher constructs the “true” British as not from the Commonwealth and their prejudices as an understandable reaction to immigrants; immigrants thus become the problem and prejudice against them is naturalized. Conservatives employed a similar rhetoric in the late 1980s during debates over the homophobic legislation known as Section 28.<sup>8</sup> In this instance, the figure threatening the nation (and always constructed as outside of it) shifted from the immigrant to the diseased, predatory gay man. These rhetorical constructions are powerful and need to be countered with equally powerful rhetoric, yet the political leadership of the Left under Thatcher was not able to challenge it particularly effectively. The Labour Party moved to the right in a misguided attempt to appeal to voters who had shifted to the Conservative Party. In the absence of capable political leadership critiquing Thatcher, the work of artists, writers, and filmmakers took on an especially vital role. As Leonard Quart asserts, “it sometimes seemed that in their savage critiques of Thatcherism, the English films of the eighties produced one of the few effective political weapons against the Thatcher tide.”<sup>9</sup> Unlike American films of the 1980s which, in general, mirrored the political shift to the right the country was undergoing, many British films and television series stood firmly in opposition to Thatcherism. Films such as *Handsworth Songs* (1986), *The Last of England* (1987), *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987), and *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* (1989) presented scathing critiques of different aspects of Thatcherism.<sup>10</sup>

In this volatile political and cultural climate Hanif Kureishi was beginning to make his name as a provocative new playwright. During this period, Channel 4 was funding and broadcasting many of Britain’s best young, independent filmmakers because

of its mandate to “encourage innovation and experiment in the form and content of programmes.”<sup>11</sup> In 1985, they commissioned Kureishi to write a script for “Film on 4.” He eagerly accepted the offer and wrote the screenplay for *My Beautiful Laundrette* during his first visit to Pakistan. According to Kureishi, “The great advantage of TV drama was that people watched it; difficult, challenging things could be said about contemporary life.”<sup>12</sup> Although originally intended as a television release, *My Beautiful Laundrette* premiered at the Edinburgh Film Festival in autumn of 1985 to great critical acclaim and then showed at the London Film Festival in November. It was released in London theaters that month and was subsequently shown all over Europe, the U.S., and Australia. The film went on to be both critically and commercially successful and earned Kureishi an Oscar nomination for Best Screenplay. Everyone involved in its making was surprised about the film’s success, especially Frears. As he points out in interviews, in its depiction of the “desperate lives” in Thatcher’s England, *My Beautiful Laundrette* resembled much British television of its time. He fails to note, however, that in its focus on Asian communities and its sympathetic depiction of two men in love, the film broke with even the most radical television. Furthermore, the film’s unique use of a queer national romance to address the difficult social issues with which Britain was struggling proved exceptionally popular as well as controversial.

In 1988 the Institute of Contemporary Art in London held a conference called *Black Film, British Cinema*. Although the conference was organized around the films *Handsworth Songs*, *The Passion of Remembrance*, and *Playing Away* (1987), *My Beautiful Laundrette* was ever-present in discussions.<sup>13</sup> Kobena Mercer, coordinator of the conference, commented on the “unexpected scale” of *My Beautiful Laundrette*’s

popularity, saying, “Few would have anticipated that a gay romance between a British-born Asian and an ex-National Front supporter, set against the backdrop of Thatcherite enterprise culture, would be the stuff of which box office successes are made!”<sup>14</sup> What is most interesting about this success, Mercer went on to argue, is that, in spite of it, “many people actively disliked the film—and did so for very different reasons.”<sup>15</sup> Mercer referred here to criticism from within Asian communities in Britain and to responses to the film from conservatives. The conservative responses are relatively easy to understand; the film depicted unapologetic gay sex, a critique of rampant racist violence, and a bleak view of the economy that Thatcherism was supposedly rejuvenating. This was not their view of Thatcher’s England nor was it the view they wanted the world to see. British-Asian responses to the film, however, were more complicated.

Some British-Asian activists and filmmakers criticized the film for producing what they saw as negative images of Asians in an already racist culture. Filmmaker Mahmood Jamal, for instance, saw *My Beautiful Laundrette* as a prime example of what Asian filmmakers should avoid: “reinforcing ... stereotypes of their own people for a few cheap laughs.”<sup>16</sup> He argued, “what is surprising about the film is that it expresses all the prejudices that this society has felt about Asians and Jews—that they are money-grabbing, scheming, sex-crazed people.”<sup>17</sup> Like other critics, he objected specifically to the depictions of various Asian characters in the film as gay, adulterous, alcoholic, superstitious, and drug dealing. Kureishi has argued in response “having a gay Pakistani man in a film seems to me to be a positive image.”<sup>18</sup> In addition, Kureishi has critiqued the call for positive images by members of some minority communities as “fatal” for a writer. A cinema of positive images, he argues, “requires useful lies and cheering



fictions: the writer as public relations officer, as hired liar.”<sup>19</sup> And this mandate, he contends, does not lead to good art. Conversely, other British-Asians criticized the film as an unrealistic depiction of their communities because it is too positive; they argued that the film fails to show the economic reality in which many British-Pakistanis lived.<sup>20</sup> Disparity of opinion about *My Beautiful Laundrette* stemmed in part from its status as one of the few British-Asian films of the time; because films representing British-Asians were scarce, *My Beautiful Laundrette* was asked to be all things to all people. Sarita Malik makes this point when she claimed, “The ‘British-Asianness’ of *My Beautiful Laundrette* overdetermined most approaches to it. The most publicized responses to the film refused to see it as anything but realist, or the characters as determined by anything other than their ethnic identity.”<sup>21</sup>

One segment of the Asian community, however, had an overwhelmingly positive response to the film: gay South Asians. *Trikone*, a gay South Asian magazine, devoted almost an entire issue to the film in 2001, over fifteen years since its release. Sandip Roy, the editor of *Trikone*, stresses the influence of the film when he claims, “the kiss between Johnny and Omar has, to many a queer South Asian, become the moment they came out to themselves.”<sup>22</sup> In the same issue actor Gordon Warnecke, who played Omar, recounts how many gay South Asians have told him they identified with his character and were grateful for the film.<sup>23</sup> In fact, gay communities internationally responded positively to the film and it continues to be cited as a favorite gay romance.<sup>24</sup> Part of this popularity results from the fact that rather than depicting its characters as conflicted over their sexual identities—as, for instance, *Victim* (1961) did—the film shows Johnny and Omar simply as two men in love.<sup>25</sup> Although it was the first British film to sympathetically

portray a homosexual main character, *Victim* constructed homosexuality as a problem and the main character as a “victim.” Kureishi’s goal was to challenge representations like this:

What I wanted to do was show a gay relationship that was not made into a big deal. It wasn’t a big torment, they were not all going, “Oh my god, I am gay. What am I going to do? How am I going to tell my parents?”... I just wanted to do a gay relationship in which it was taken for granted. Nobody discussed it. Nobody ever used the word gay. It was just part of the world. That seemed to me quite progressive.<sup>26</sup>

Some viewers praised the film precisely because of this ease, while others objected, claiming it was unrealistic. This tension raises the issue of the genre’s realism. If we expect the film to accurately represent reality and adhere to a realist narrative style, then *My Beautiful Laundrette* is a disappointment; however, if we read the film as a blend of fantasy and realism, it becomes much more internally coherent and successful.

Critic Julian Henriques correctly notes that this question of realism is at the center of debates about *My Beautiful Laundrette*:

Most of the black people and particularly Asians who I have talked to about the film hated it. The reason for this, I think, is because they refused to look at the film in any other way than as a piece of realism, that is to say, a film that attempted an accurate representation of its subject.<sup>27</sup>

He sees the film as successful precisely because of this break with realist narrative strategies: “The souped-up laundrette and the rest of the film were to me a fantasy expressing the feelings, contradictions, and imagination of the characters.... To me it was saying something about both the joys and the fears of living in mid-1980s Britain.”<sup>28</sup> For Henriques, then, the ability to express emotional truths and depict contradictions is more important than documenting “reality,” and he finds *My Beautiful Laundrette* compelling according to this criteria. It is important to remember, however, that *My Beautiful*

*Laundrette* does not completely break with realism; it creates a realist narrative that exists alongside a more playful, idealized style that takes place inside the laundrette. In contrast, many black British films of the 1980s were abandoning realism altogether and constructing experimental documentaries and non-narrative videos and films such as Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989).<sup>29</sup> Compared to these films, *My Beautiful Laundrette* is presented in a fairly realist manner and is often derided to this style. Judith Williamson claims a prejudice in the film community (represented in her analysis by journals like *Screen*) sees realist, narrative films as mainstream and not worthy of critical attention. The worthwhile films are "non-narrative, difficult, even boring, oppositional cinema."<sup>30</sup> According to these criteria, *My Beautiful Laundrette* fares badly because it is definitely narrative and rarely difficult. But, as Williamson notes anecdotally, in contrast to Kobena Mercer's claims, many people loved the film:

It's been a highly *enjoyed* film. In some ways it's an absolute classic Romance. You're just dying for those people to kiss—and they're both men. And one is black and the other is white. And you're sitting there in the role of the classic Hollywood spectator thinking "are they going to get off with each other? Is he going to say it? Will he be late?" The cinematic structures that it employs are completely mainstream, it is not an avant-garde film in its visual form at all.... And yet it had this enthusiastic reception just about everywhere except in what you might call the *Screen* world.<sup>31</sup>

Although Williamson does not engage with the controversies the film generated in British-Asian communities, her point about narrative film is instructive. *My Beautiful Laundrette* is too non-realist for those looking for accurate representations of social realities, but it is too narrative and, therefore, too mainstream for critics and filmmakers who privilege an avant-garde cinema. When we look at the film on its own terms, however, we see that its use of romance and fantasy allows the film to imagine a union

that represents a more inclusive nation and position audiences to invest in this construction.

### **“A Ritz among Laundrettes”: What Fantasy Allows**

It is the British, the white British, who have to learn that being British isn't what it was. Now it is a more complex thing, involving new elements. So there must be a fresh way of seeing Britain and the choices it faces: and a new way of being British after all this time. Much thought, discussion and self-examination must go into seeing the necessity for this, what this 'new way of being British' involves and how difficult it might be to attain.<sup>32</sup>

When *My Beautiful Laundrette* begins, Omar lives at home with his father and Johnny squats in an abandoned building. Like the other characters in the film, neither works nor appears to have much purpose in his life. Soon Omar gets a job working for his Uncle Nasser, an entrepreneur who owns various businesses in South London. Racial tensions are rising in the community and Asians are frequently targeted by working-class white youth who resent their growing success. During one potentially violent incident, Omar meets Johnny, his old childhood friend, and hires him to help rehabilitate a laundrette Uncle Nasser has given Omar to manage. As the two work side-by-side to transform the trashed-out laundrette, their relationship evolves, following a traditional romance structure: they meet, fall in love, and are tested as obstacles appear. Though both of their communities oppose their relationship (although few recognize its true nature) and other love interests threaten to come between them, it is Johnny's past participation in anti-immigrant marches that strains the relationship the most. The film, therefore, questions how individuals, and by extension communities, can connect in spite of the violence, resentments, and past wrongs which threaten to divide them. Despite the trials they suffer, the film ends with Johnny and Omar together inside the laundrette.

It is not coincidental that the film ends in the laundrette. As might be expected from its prominence in the title, the space functions in a number of significant ways in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. As a business Johnny and Omar build together, it is a symbol of a black middle-class and white working-class partnership as well as a reversal of colonial power dynamics. In addition, it functions in the plot as a sort of community center where the neighborhood gathers. However, it is the laundrette's mise en scene that I find most significant. It is the one beautiful, fantastic place we see, and it highlights the bleakness of the rest of the film's settings. Not coincidentally, it is also the only space where Johnny and Omar can safely be together sexually and romantically; as such, it is "an outlet for socially transgressive desires."<sup>33</sup> Hill describes the laundrette as an "ambivalent symbol" that pushes "the boundaries of realism outwards in order to give expression to those 'realities' which a realism 'of the surface' might not be otherwise equipped to provide."<sup>34</sup> When we enter the transformed laundrette, we enter a space that, although "real" in the diegesis, is imbued with the sounds, colors, and exoticism of a dream world or fantasy. The editing, the mise en scene, and even the sound all alter in order to express the contrast between the outside world and the inside of the transformed laundrette.

*My Beautiful Laundrette* opens in a small, dingy room in a squat from which Johnny and his friend Genghis are being evicted. As well as setting up some of the main thematic concerns of the film such as male friendship, black ownership, white poverty, homelessness, and displacement, we learn much from the mise en scene of this scene. The front door of the squat is barricaded with old furniture, the paint on the walls is faded and chipped, and the only light comes from the windows. Johnny and Genghis' room has

peeling yellow wallpaper and a bare mattress on the floor where Genghis sleeps. Johnny is asleep sitting up in a chair covered only by his coat. The scene is typical; the world the film portrays is dark and has little color in it. The film moves from dilapidated squats like this one to dark garages to the cramped, dingy flat Omar shares with his father. Outside is no better. Shot in London in February because Frears likes the bleak light of winter, the film depicts gray streets, nearly empty businesses, and people wandering aimlessly. Nothing is growing or thriving in this environment. Kureishi and Frears' vision of Thatcher's England is one of economic devastation with little hope for change. Only one space stands out in this sea of gray: the transformed laundrette.

When we first see the laundrette, it is much like the other settings in the film: dimly lit, dirty, covered in graffiti, and filled with young men and boys loitering. Johnny and Omar soon smash walls, renovate washers, paint the building inside and out, and, finally, hang an elaborate configuration of lights out front. When the dozens of blinking light bulbs and the huge, flashing neon sign they surround light up, the laundrette formerly known as "Churchill's" has become "Powders." As the camera pulls back—revealing a sign more reminiscent of movie marquees of the 1930s than a laundrette in South London in the 1980s—we see that something has changed. The film is no longer solely a realist narrative documenting urban decay under Thatcher; it is also a fantasy. Yet it continues to interweave a realist narrative with the fantasy that takes place inside the laundrette.

The interior of the transformed laundrette is kept hidden from audiences as well as from the neighborhood until the scene of the grand opening. When we are finally let inside, the whole neighborhood is still queued up anxiously waiting to enter. A slow pan

around the empty interior of the room reveals pastel colors, shiny, reflective surfaces, and bright sunlight. Blue and yellow washers with Japanese-style waves painted above them line the orange walls, plants and a large fish tank are arranged about the room, and an artificial, bubbling sound can be heard. A television hangs on the wall and a fancy sound system plays a waltz. Nothing we have seen so far prepares us for all of this; it is almost as if the film has changed from black and white to color. When guests are finally allowed inside, most are astonished. One woman calls it “a wonderful ship,” while Omar’s father compares it to “a ladies’ hair dressing salon.” As these comments point out, the space is both feminized and reminiscent of the tropics. It is, however, a completely artificial and obviously constructed tropics, a parody of the “hot country” film settings Kureishi disdains that create nostalgic colonial fantasies. Examining two significant scenes which take place in the laundrette reveals the importance of this space in creating a fantasy of union and allows us to evaluate how fantasy and national romance are being used in the film.

The laundrette provides the setting for, and creates the possibility of, one of the most important scenes in the film. In this scene, the image of Johnny and Omar having sex in the back room is juxtaposed with Uncle Nasser and his mistress Rachael dancing in the front room of the laundrette. When the scene begins, Johnny is seductively drawing Omar into the back room as they wait to allow guests inside for the laundrette’s grand opening. The room is a small, dimly lit office with a large two-way mirror that enables them to see out without allowing anyone else to see in. Johnny sits on Omar’s lap and opens a bottle of champagne while they discuss their imminent success. When the discussion turns to Omar’s father, the man they are waiting for, Omar gets up and walks

across the room. A series of medium shot/reverse shots reveals Omar with bars of shadow across his face and Johnny in the light. Suddenly upset, Omar looks off into space and begins to speak passionately:

Marching. Marching through Lewisham. It was bricks and bottles and Union Jacks. It was immigrants out. It was kill us. People we knew. And it was you. He saw you marching and you saw his face, watching you. Don't deny it. We were there when you went past.

A close up of Johnny's face reveals surprise and then shame. He looks down as Omar continues: "Papa hated himself and his job. He was afraid on the streets for me. So he took it out on her. And she couldn't bear it." As he says this, Johnny walks slowly over to Omar and sits with him. In the medium shot that follows, both men turn from each other and face the camera as Johnny leans in towards Omar, taking off his jacket, reaching into his shirt, and touching his chest. As he does so, Omar looks off into the distance saying, "Such failure, such emptiness." Johnny's head rests on Omar's shoulder. They sit silently in the frame like this for a few seconds.

The scene then cuts to Rachael and Nasser entering the laundrette and admiring what "the boys" have done. They speak to each other tenderly and discuss their relationship. It cuts back to a medium shot of "the boys," now facing each other and shirtless. The light is dim but we see their faces. They are looking at each other and Omar smiles. Johnny has his hands on Omar's neck as he says: "There ain't nothing I can say to make it up to you. There's only things I can do to show you that ... that I am with you." The lights dim and they kiss in the shadows. The scene cuts back to Rachael and Nasser who have begun waltzing to the music playing on the sound system. They continue to dance gracefully and begin to speak of Omar as Nasser expresses the desire to get him married. In a humorous juxtaposition, the film cuts to the backroom where Johnny is



naked and on top of Omar as they kiss and pour champagne into each other's mouths. Rachael and Nasser, politely waltzing, are visible through the mirror behind the boys. The scene cuts back to Rachael and Nasser kissing tenderly and then more passionately. It quickly returns to Omar and Johnny having sex as they suddenly notice Rachael and Nasser through the window, pull away from each other, and dress hastily.

This scene juxtaposing Johnny and Omar with Rachael and Nasser parallels a similar scene in Kureishi and Frears' next collaboration, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, in which we see three couples having sex on a screen split in thirds. Both of these scenes reveal the prevalence of interracial relationships in Kureishi's work: the films *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* and *My Son the Fanatic* (1997) center on interracial relationships, and interracial sex and love feature prominently in the novels *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and *The Black Album* (1995).<sup>35</sup> In addition, like Kureishi himself and *My Beautiful Laundrette*'s Omar, many of his main characters are the children of interracial unions. It is not surprising then that Kureishi would take on the conventions of the national romance, but his choice to make a same-sex relationship the one that stands as the national allegory in *My Beautiful Laundrette* may surprise some viewers. The film depicts other relationships which cross class and racial boundaries and could have served as national romances, but Johnny and Omar's is the only one shown to be both productive—it creates the laundrette—and functioning at the end of the film. By contrast, Nasser and Rachael are happy together, yet their relationship ends because of Nasser's marriage. Other romantic unions in *My Beautiful Laundrette* fare even worse. Nasser and his wife are pictured in the frame together only once when they scream at each other in Urdu about his affair with Rachael. A picture on the mantle of Omar's mother, a white

woman who committed suicide before the film opens, is all that is left of Papa's marriage. The contrast with these failed unions highlights the success of Johnny and Omar's relationship, and this privileging of a gay relationship as the one that thrives was intentional on the parts of both Frears and Kureishi.

More than just an intervention into previous representations of homosexuality, however, the relationship between Johnny and Omar raises questions about how we can negotiate painful aspects of the past, both individual and collective, and to what extent these traumas can and should be incorporated, forgotten, or healed. Both the couple and, by extension, the audience must come to terms with Johnny's past participation in fascist marches. Johnny explicitly states that he cannot make up for his action with words, but will do "things" in an attempt "to show... that I am with you." He proceeds to let Omar undress him and they have sex. Sex, then, becomes what Johnny offers to prove his devotion, and in this fantasy space it heals the rift caused by his betrayal. Yet the film does not allow Johnny's past to be forgotten: it keeps reappearing in his friends' racism and in Omar's father's memory of Johnny's acts. This reliance on sex as a means of healing is, therefore, recognized as a fragile one based on a temporary act. Furthermore, the fantasy space of the laundrette is not, ultimately, safe from the violence of the film's outside world. Tensions have been mounting throughout the film as conflicts between the black and white characters intensify, and, in the final scenes, Salim, a Pakistani character who works for Omar's family and who injured one of the racist punks earlier, is attacked and badly beaten outside the laundrette. Johnny watches in discomfort from inside, finally stepping in and breaking up the fight when it looks like Salim might be killed. In the process, he must fight Genghis, his mate from the film's opening. Omar arrives just as

the fight breaks up and runs to a bleeding, stumbling Johnny. He holds and shields Johnny with his own body when the punks run back, but instead of attacking Johnny and Omar, they throw a garbage can through the window of the laundrette, breaking the fragile barrier the film had constructed between the two narrative spaces.

The next shot shows the two inside the laundrette as Johnny talks angrily of leaving and Omar gently tries to wash the blood off of his face. Omar responds by telling anecdotes of Johnny as a child always running off. He calls Johnny “dirty” and “beautiful,” but Johnny rebuffs his words and his touch, walking to the door of the debris-filled laundrette and looking out as if he would leave. As Omar kisses his neck from behind, he stops. The final image of the film is a medium shot of Johnny and Omar facing each other, shirtless, over a sink full of water. Omar soaps Johnny’s chest and gets him wet as he tries to wash the soap off. The two splash each other and slowly begin to smile and laugh. It is a tender, playful image. The familiar, non-diegetic bubbling sound begins and the door closes obscuring our view.

In contrast to earlier graphic and divisive images of white on black violence, the film’s final image is one of union. If we read the union of Johnny and Omar as being reborn in this final frame—a reading the water imagery encourages—and their relationship as a national allegory, then this image suggests the birth of a new Britain capable of healing from its racist past and present. It is significant too that the film resolves Johnny and Omar’s conflict not with words, but instead with images. As Johnny says, nothing he can say will make up for his fascist past and his betrayal of Omar and Papa; there are only things he can do to show that he is with Omar now. Consequently, the final image depicts them together, not speaking but laughing and playing. The film is

not implying that racial violence is gone from the world outside the laundrette; in fact, it has just shown otherwise. Nor is it saying Johnny and Omar can escape these prejudices. It is, however, providing a counter image to the violence, and, significantly, this counter image is again set inside the laundrette: a space which is at once public and private, contained and permeable, as the garbage can breaking through the window shows.

This final scene does not imply that the romance between Johnny and Omar has done away with this very real social problem. The healing depicted in the film is symbolic and located in fantasy—it only happens inside the laundrette. Yet some critics miss this vital point. Susan Torrey Barber, for instance, claims:

Their relationship survives, suggesting not only that their bond of mutual love and devotion may bring their communities together in a spirit of trust and collaboration, but also that they will rebuild their trashed shop and perhaps create a chain of laundrettes.<sup>36</sup>

On the contrary, at the end of the film there is little evidence that they will continue to run the one laundrette together, let alone open a chain. And although their relationship does survive, there is no implication that their communities will be brought together by their romance. In fact, the opposite has proven to be true: their relationship has been the catalyst for much of the discord and violence in the film. Johnny is isolated from his old friends because he works for Omar, Omar's family is suspicious of his relationship with Johnny, and their partnership has inadvertently led to the fight that leaves both Salim and Johnny badly beaten. Barber makes the mistake of reading the relationship literally and in terms of realism, when instead it functions allegorically and in terms of fantasy. It is only when we pay attention to the film's formal choices and its hybridization of fantasy and realism that we can correctly interpret its politics.

In addition to using Johnny and Omar's romance to make an argument for a new, more inclusive nation, *My Beautiful Laundrette* comments upon the genre of the national romance itself. The film revises the national romance, not only by its inclusion of a same-sex couple but, just as importantly, with its refusal to erase political tensions through the union of its protagonists. As such, it implicitly acknowledges the pitfalls of the national romance as a genre. Although some critics misread the romance in *My Beautiful Laundrette* as one that transcends class and race, the film itself does not support such a reading. Rather than erasing the differences between the two men with a humanist message that we are all alike, the film explores their differences and even, at times, exploits them. Moreover, the conflicts between their respective communities are not healed via their romance—except symbolically inside the fantasy space of the laundrette. Thus, *My Beautiful Laundrette* avoids the traps some other national romances fall into and demonstrates the potential of the queer national romance to re-imagine the nation, a potential critics have not recognized. Insofar as the imagined community of the nation is itself a kind of collective fantasy, the film is able to do real work through its fantasy—even if the utopic space of the laundrette and the relationship it enables are ultimately unsustainable. The film uses its audience's desire to see this fragile space survive to create an emotional investment in a new conception of Britishness.

### **The Queer National Romance Played Straight: *The Crying Game***

*The Crying Game* is a success by almost any standard. The ninth highest grossing Irish film of all time in Ireland, it was ranked fifth favorite in a survey on Irish film taken in 2000.<sup>37</sup> In addition, it was a huge phenomenon in the United States, where it was the

most profitable foreign film released in 1993 and broke the glass ceiling on what art house films previously generated at the box office. According to Irish film historian Kevin Rockett, it is the “most commercially-successful foreign-produced film ever released in the US.”<sup>38</sup> Critically successful as well, *The Crying Game* was nominated for six Academy Awards.<sup>39</sup> Rockett argues that the film’s international acclaim was so influential that *The Crying Game* was responsible for the reopening of The Irish Film Board—*Bord Scannan na hEireann* (BSE)—a government agency that had been responsible for supporting numerous indigenous projects before it was shut down in 1987.<sup>40</sup>

As a consequence of a lack of government support—exemplified by the closing of the BSE—most of the films about Ireland produced prior to the 1980s are British or American and, many Irish critics argue, often do not reflect the realities of modern Ireland. These films tend to depict Ireland as a “blissful, rural idyll” or a “dark and strife-torn maelstrom” of sectarian violence.<sup>41</sup> As Hill points out, these stereotypes position Ireland in opposition to both modernity and rational thought; the Irish are either simple peasants trying to live off the land or violent terrorists. Neither view allows for any critical analysis of history or politics and instead depicts Irish identity as inherently fixed in one of these two stereotypes. To be successful internationally, Rockett and others argue, films about Ireland have had to conform to audiences’ expectations which have been shaped by stereotypes. Furthermore, according to these critics, recent indigenous Irish films such as *Waking Ned Divine* illustrate that a film’s national origin does not determine whether it will embrace or reject these stereotypes.<sup>42</sup>

Where, then, does a film like *The Crying Game* fit into the Irish cinematic landscape? In what follows, I argue that Jordan's use of the queer national romance—a heretofore-overlooked element of this much-discussed film—reveals much about the film's politics. Although it looks like an original contribution to Irish cinema that challenges earlier images, *The Crying Game* actually recycles old stereotypes of the Irish as atavistically violent in an attempt to appease British investors and appeal to international audiences. Furthermore, in the film's portrayal of queer characters, black characters, and women it participates in a number of reactionary trends. Although many critics have acknowledged Jordan's sexism<sup>43</sup> and others have discussed the homoeroticism present in his films and fiction,<sup>44</sup> few have addressed how the romantic union between men is a key structural component of his films, an oversight which leads to other omissions in their analyses.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps because (with the exception of *The Crying Game*) Jordan's films are not stories that deal with characters who acknowledge any type of queer identity or engage in same-sex sexual contact, many critics fail to note the central significance of the male union to these films. Yet, downplaying or misreading this narrative trope can lead us to overlook the way in which Jordan consistently imagines the Irish nation as a union between men while women or feminized men are portrayed as disruptive outsiders who must be expelled.

A quick glance at two of Jordan's other films reveals the prevalence of his use of a particular sort of romantic triangle. Both *Michael Collins* (1996) and *The Butcher Boy* (1998) tell the story of the dismantling of a relationship between two men or boys.<sup>46</sup> Prior to these break-ups, the films depict idyllic scenes of boys playing in the country or young men laughing and rough-housing. The rural countryside in the 1960s in *The Butcher Boy*

and the nationalist movement of pre-Civil War Ireland in *Michael Collins* are wholly male homosocial worlds, and in each film it is a woman and a feminized male who come between the previously united male pair. These films, therefore, tell the story of the nation—whether literally in *Michael Collins* or figuratively in *The Butcher Boy*—as the story of two men or boys separated by a woman (Kitty, Mrs. Nugent) and an effeminate man or boy (de Valera, Phillip Nugent). *The Crying Game* follows some elements of this formula and alters others. As in the two other films I mention, a national struggle—in this case between the IRA and the British—is narrated via the romance. The metaphor of divided lovers is particularly powerful in the Irish context because of the Ireland’s political situation. In 1925 the British Government divided the six counties of Northern Ireland from the Irish republic. This border was created through a compromise between the British, the Northern Irish Protestants, and the Irish Republic with little thought given to the Northern Irish Catholic nationalists who would become second-class citizens in their own cities and towns. Since partition, Northern Ireland has been made up of a Protestant majority that favors union with Great Britain and a Catholic minority that wants a united Ireland, a tension that has led to continued violence between nationalists on both sides. It makes sense, then, that Jordan would choose to tell his stories of the nation as triangulated romances. In each case, a woman comes between the two characters whose union we have been positioned to desire. In a radical shift, however, in *The Crying Game* the most feminine of all of Jordan’s biologically male characters—Dil, a transvestite—functions not to separate the original male pair (Jody and Fergus) but to unite them.



Jordan initially proposed the story that became *The Crying Game* in 1982 under the title *The Soldier's Wife*. The film he imagined would detail the friendship that developed between “two opponents during a conflict” and would also “contrast Black and Irish experiences in Britain.”<sup>47</sup> This idea had been in Jordan’s mind for some time, and he acknowledges that it had its roots in Frank O’Connor’s short story “Guests of the Nation” (1931) and Brendan Behan’s play *The Hostage* (1958), both of which depict the relationships that develop between guards and prisoners.<sup>48</sup> However, in 1983 Bernard MacLaverty’s novel *Cal* was published and was subsequently made into a film by Pat O’Connor in 1984.<sup>49</sup> *Cal* was similar enough in plot to *The Soldier's Wife* that Jordan did not want to make his film as it stood. The script was shelved until 1991 when he came up with the idea of making the “wife” a transvestite; Jordan wrote *The Crying Game* in ten days.<sup>50</sup> Finding funding for the film, however, proved much more difficult than writing it. *The Crying Game* was made without American backing because, Jordan claims, investors in America ran scared from the lack of marketability they saw in a film that addressed race, sexuality, and political violence. In the end, the film was funded by British and European investors including its major producer Palace Pictures, the Eurotrustees, and Channel 4.

*The Crying Game* took in only two million pounds in the U.K., but it did much better in the United States where it eventually grossed sixty-eight million dollars.<sup>51</sup> This feat was a huge accomplishment given that, at the time, even the most successful art house movies did not make more than twenty-five million dollars. Many credit distributor Miramax’s advertising campaign for at least part of this achievement and contrast it with the film’s “lacklustre” U.K. advertising.<sup>52</sup> The American tagline, “the movie everybody’s

talking about, but no one is giving away the secret,” worked to intrigue audiences and the press who wrote about the phenomenon the film was creating. Yet a careful look at *The Crying Game*’s reception reveals how the choice to tell its story as a queer national romance was largely responsible for its popularity outside England and Ireland. In the U.K., in contrast, the political context in which the film was read ensured a more hostile reception. This difference in the film’s reception illustrates how the queer national romance can simplify and obscure a complex political situation and make it palatable to audiences less familiar with the political context.

One reason for this disparity in reception is that *The Crying Game* was released during a renewed wave of IRA bombings in England. As Jane Giles notes, the bombings “raised the stakes in the ongoing discussion about the cinematic representation of the IRA.”<sup>53</sup> Consequently, many reviewers in England and Ireland attempted to decipher whether the film is pro or anti-IRA and their reviews revolved around this one issue. For instance, Tom Paulin in the *Guardian* wrote, “*The Crying Game* is a shockingly awful film. It’s so sentimental, just propaganda for the IRA.”<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, some Republicans criticized the film as anti-nationalist because Fergus—the only appealing character involved with the IRA—wants to leave the organization, and Jude—who becomes the personification of the group—is such a brutal and unsympathetic character. At least one English critic argued that the film makes no political argument and noted that this absence may aggravate some audiences. He described the film as “sitting on the fence” politically and claimed, “No judgment is offered about the Irish Troubles; Jordan’s concern is to strip characters of beliefs and other protective clothing, leaving them vulnerable to the heart’s crazy urgings.”<sup>55</sup> While most English critics reviewed the

film relatively favorably overall, many reviews were based on the critic's assessment of the film's treatment of political situation.

Unlike British and Irish critics, only one American reviewer even raised the question of whether the film is pro or anti-IRA.<sup>56</sup> Instead, *The Crying Game* received glowing reviews in the American press, which hailed it as an original and challenging film. For instance, Hal Hinson called it "one of the most challenging, surprising films of the year," and wrote, "Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* ventures into such exquisitely unique territory that you feel giddy from the pleasure of being allowed to travel along."<sup>57</sup>

The only American critiques of the film came from two very different camps: conservatives who labeled it "homosexual propaganda" and gay and lesbian critics who complained that the silence Miramax was asking the reviewers to adhere to amounted to a kind of closeting. Alex Ross argued the latter position claiming that by asking reviewers and audiences not to reveal the secret cross-dressing plot twist, reviewers of *The Crying Game* "have reverted to an archaic vocabulary of euphemism and insinuation" that perpetuates homosexuality as "the plotline that dare not speak its name."<sup>58</sup> Other film critics in the GLBT community, however, disagreed with Ross. Judith Halberstam, for instance, argued that using a character who disguises their biological sex is central to the work the film is doing around identity politics.<sup>59</sup> She claimed that the film asks us to question all kinds of identities including sexuality, nationality, and gender. Although the film has homophobic elements (which I discuss in my reading of its closing scene), I agree that the "secret" does not construct homosexuality or transvestism as a horror, but instead asks audiences to think about the constructed nature of identity. Still this extreme

disparity of opinion about the film reveals one of its weaknesses: although it raises a number of charged political and cultural issues, it does justice to few of them.

In the academy as well as in the popular press *The Crying Game* elicited a flood of critical analysis, yet most of this criticism focuses on only one or two of the many categories of identity the film raises and then goes on to evaluate the film according to its treatment of that aspect. For instance, some critics attend only to questions of sexuality and gender, while others discuss the film's representation of race without noting its representation of nationality. bell hooks, for example, reads Dil as a "ho" and her character as drawing on a mammy stereotype based on her interactions with Fergus, but she fails to recognize the Irish as a colonized people who have themselves been racially othered—a dynamic which inflects Fergus' relationship with both Dil and Jody.<sup>60</sup> Sarah Edge, on the other hand, refuses to see Dil as anything but a man and allows Dil's gender to be determined solely by her physical body.<sup>61</sup> Her reading astutely analyzes the film's misogyny but fails to acknowledge that Dil is not just a man. This focus on race and gender in hooks' case and gender narrowly defined in Edge's causes them to overlook some of the other facets of identity at work here, such as genders beyond male and female and Irish postcolonial nationality. This critical reception of the film illustrates how by putting so many categories of identity into play at once, Jordan risks not elaborating any fully.

Regardless of a number of productive interventions it makes, there is much *The Crying Game* leaves insufficiently addressed. As my analysis of the film illustrates, black, queer, and nationalist characters function as a backdrop to this story of the redemption of Fergus, a redemption which takes place through two different romances.

While the romance between Fergus and Jody (the British soldier he takes hostage) subverts traditional representations of both gay men and nationalists, the romance between Fergus and Dil (the transvestite he falls in love with) allows Jordan to imagine the union between Ireland and England without women and without Irish nationalism.<sup>62</sup> Women and unreformed nationalists are not only absent from the film's final union, they are vilified and brutally expelled from the narrative. Consequently, the film's powerful imagining of the uniting of two nations in conflict is based on the exclusion of two groups it deems problematic.

### **Stand By Your Man: The Prisoner, his Captor, and the Prisoner's Wife**

*The Crying Game* begins as Jude, a female IRA agent, lures Jody, a black British soldier, into a trap. The IRA holds Jody hostage for three days before he is killed while trying to escape. During those three days Jody befriends Fergus, the hero of the film, and Fergus promises he will go to London to find Jody's girlfriend and tell her Jody was thinking of her. Fergus goes to London and finds Dil but does not fulfill his promise right away; instead, he falls in love with Dil who turns out to be a transvestite. As I will demonstrate below, Fergus continues to love and desire Dil and even serves time in jail for her. While Fergus becomes a reformed nationalist and leaves the IRA, Jude emerges as the representative of the organization; and it is Jude the film expels in a brutal scene. The film thus presents conflicting visions as embodied by the romances it charts: while one romantic triangle challenges nationalist homophobia, the other creates a distinctly misogynist and anti-nationalist allegory.

Even before the often-discussed sight of Dil's penis forces audiences to reconsider earlier interactions between Fergus and Jody, the dynamic between them is depicted as emotionally intense and romantic. Their relationship begins when the IRA abducts Jody at a carnival outside Belfast; even under these violent circumstances Fergus distinguishes himself from the other IRA volunteers by asking Jody for his name. Fergus continues to care for Jody for the three days he is held captive, feeding him by hand and comforting him when Jody learns he is going to be executed in the morning. These interactions establish Fergus as humane, compassionate, and even nurturing, in contrast to both the film's other IRA members (especially the female agent Jude) and to previous cinematic representations of the IRA. Fergus' attentions, however, soon move beyond the merely compassionate. The film acknowledges the flirtatious and even erotic component of the relationship between the two men in subsequent scenes. For instance, at one point Fergus has to help Jody remove his penis from his pants to urinate because Jody's hands are tied. The scene becomes both comic and erotic as Jody continuously alludes to the sexual nature of the moment. *The Crying Game* incorporates scenes like these to comment on the homoerotic element that is so often present yet unacknowledged in homosocial spaces. Military organizations and nationalist discourse are both sites invested in repressing homoeroticism which makes *The Crying Game's* representation here so subversive; it brings to light the eroticism that flourishes between men in these spaces. By exposing the link between the homosocial and the homosexual in this interaction between prisoner and captor, the film makes visible the queer possibilities of all kinds of homosocial yet homophobic spaces, including the military and nationalist movements. Just as we are asked to re-read Fergus and Jody's interactions as homoerotic,

so are we given license to further “queer the colonial allegory” itself.<sup>63</sup> *The Crying Game* allows us to reinterpret other texts depicting homosocial bonds in a different light as well, including the Behan and O’Connor stories from which Jordan’s screenplay developed. The film can only make this type of intervention because it depicts Fergus and Jody’s relationship as a romance.

Despite the hostage situation that structures their interactions, the relationship between the two men develops along the lines of a romance: they meet, overcome initial differences, discover an affinity with the other, and confront obstacles. Although their romance ends tragically with Jody’s violent and accidental death at the hands of the British Army, the two men are later symbolically united through Jody’s “girlfriend” Dil. In this way, the relationship between Jody and Fergus positions us in advance to desire the union between Fergus and Dil. With that one infamous shot panning down to Dil’s penis, Fergus and the audience are asked to reinterpret all earlier interactions between not only Fergus and Dil but also Fergus and Jody. The intimacy of Fergus and Jody’s bond had been established when they exchanged names, stories, and, finally, a lover. The film reads like the perfect articulation of Sedgwick’s triangle until it is revealed in this one frame that Dil is not a woman. Because Dil identifies as a woman but has a male body, it is tempting and logical to read her as transgender. Jordan could have used her representation to interrogate gender identity and explore genders besides male and female, but the film is not interested in exploring transgender identity. Instead, Jordan constructs Dil as a woman who is eventually revealed to be a man—albeit a very feminine one who continues to perform a traditional version of femininity.

What happens to the colonial allegory, discussed in my introduction, when the triangle is made up of an Irish man, a British soldier, and a British transvestite? I contend that this particular sexual triangle allows Jordan to depict a union between Ireland and England that does not involve women or, in this case, Irish nationalists because both groups are vilified and expelled in the character of Jude. Moreover, while the film is able to incorporate a number of marginalized identities into this union—such as black and queer characters—it creates this postcolonial cosmopolitanism at the expense of any political engagement either with Britain’s continued occupation of Northern Ireland or with the subjugation of women within the Irish nationalist movement. As it does so, it creates a colonial allegory that makes a misogynist and anti-nationalist argument for a union without women and nationalists.

To create this national allegory that excludes women, the film must strike a precarious balance between soliciting our support for the romantic union of Fergus and Dil and denying the sexuality of this union. Despite Fergus’ initial homophobic reaction to the revelation of Dil’s biological sex, the final scenes of *The Crying Game* illustrate that he continues to care for and, I would argue, desire Dil. As importantly, the film positions the audience to want the relationship between the two to continue.<sup>64</sup> In the instant after Dil reveals herself, Fergus lashes out, hitting her in the face and running into the bathroom to vomit. As Fergus leaves the apartment he apologizes for hitting Dil, but goes despite her pleas to stay. The next night, however, we see Fergus following Dil to a bar in an attempt to speak with her. After she rebuffs him, he obsessively paces below the windows of her apartment and leaves a note apologizing for hitting her. In the next scene Dil has forgiven Fergus and appears at his workplace performing the role of the attentive



girlfriend, bringing him tea in a picnic basket. Although Fergus continues to keep Dil physically at a distance in this scene and admonishes her for the intimate epithets she uses to refer to him such as “love” and “darling,” he seems also to relent a bit. For instance, Fergus’ chivalry continues when he defends Dil by threatening the man who calls her a “tart.” In the scenes that follow, Fergus repeatedly expresses dismay at Dil’s gender—saying, for example, “I kinda liked you as a girl” and “you should’ve stayed a girl”—but they continue to spend time together and even kiss twice. In addition, Fergus protects Dil from danger, exploding in rage when Jude suggests the IRA will harm Dil, and eventually proves his affection by serving time in jail for the murder Dil commits. The trajectory of their relationship follows the traditional romance structure as the lovers discover an obstacle, have a misunderstanding, and then reconcile only to face jail, the final obstacle to their romance.

On the other hand, the film takes great pains to make clear that Fergus and Dil are not involved sexually after Dil’s biological sex is revealed. For instance, although they spend two nights together, in both scenes long shots reveal them fully dressed on a bed side by side. In one scene (ironically labeled “Honeymoon” on the DVD), Dil is even shown beneath the covers of the bed while Fergus sleeps on top of them. While the film needs their romance to make its point about healing divides and conquering difference through love, it fears the possibility of sex between two people who are biologically male, regardless of their genders.<sup>65</sup> Thus, the film homophobically contains the potential sexuality between Dil and Fergus, yet it also positions us to invest in their romance and, by extension, in the national romance their union represents.<sup>66</sup> This schizophrenic mixture of insistence on both the romance and its desexualization is clearest in the film’s finale.

The film's closing scene takes place in a prison during visiting hours. As the scene opens, a long shot shows a group of women and children entering a large room and sitting down with the men they have come to visit. The camera tracks one strikingly-dressed "woman" in a long leather trench coat who emerges from the crowd and crosses the room. We follow her as she walks up a short flight of stairs to a prisoner who waits alone in a small glass room. Fergus smiles from his place behind the glass as Dil approaches, and her grown-out hair alerts us to the fact that time has passed. In this scene Fergus and Dil are formally presented as a couple through the film's cinematography and editing—albeit a couple separated by a sheet of glass; both figures are set apart from the crowd until they are united in one shot. In this shot, the camera stops tracking Dil as she sits down across from Fergus and frames the two together. They are alone and set above the other prisoners and visitors, except for a guard sitting off to one side, a reminder of both Fergus' incarceration and of the spectral third figures who have haunted their relationship all along. The dialogue further reinforces this perception of them as a couple as Dil discusses the vitamins she has brought for Fergus and calls him "love" and "darling" during a shot/reverse shot sequence. Dil then asks why he is "doing time for her." Fergus answers, "It's in my nature," and proceeds to retell the story of the frog and the scorpion first told to him by Jody.<sup>67</sup> Although the film is constantly depicting identity as a performance—as not fixed but instead fluid—the parable of the scorpion not being able to escape his nature and stinging the frog articulates a kind of essentialism that contradicts this notion of performative identity.

While much has been written on the story of the frog and the scorpion, another aspect of the closing has not been discussed: the music. After Fergus tells the story of the

frog and the scorpion, the camera begins to slowly pull back and out of the room as Lyle Lovett sings “Stand by Your Man.” This non-diegetic music functions in a number of ways. First, Lovett singing lyrics normally sung by a woman reinforces the film’s interest in cross-gender performance. However, Lovett, a star in one of the most gender normative of music genres, is fairly well known to be heterosexual. Although he is a man singing about “standing by your man,” his performance does not imply homosexual desire; instead it creates a campy, kitschy mood which undercuts the potential seriousness and romance of the scene.<sup>68</sup> Second, this song about standing by your man regardless of his flaws reminds us of the traditional nature of Dil’s attachment to Fergus as she plays the role of the dutiful prisoner’s wife counting the days until his release. The prisoner’s wife plays a significant role in Irish literature and film—she is the woman left behind who must remain faithful to her man—and having a black, British transvestite play the prisoner’s wife is a challenging and novel move that asks that we rethink traditional racial and gender roles associated with nationalist struggle.<sup>69</sup> Third, this song harkens back to the film’s opening with Percy Sledge singing “When a Man Loves a Woman.” Both songs signal the film’s investment in romance yet also work on an ironic level, reminding us that Dil is not exactly a woman. The camera continues to pull back and the final line of the film can be heard over Lovett as Fergus ends the story: “I can’t help it, it’s in my nature.”<sup>70</sup>

Both Jordan and actor Stephen Rea (Fergus) have stated that *The Crying Game* is an attempt to counter the cinematic tradition of depicting IRA members as mindless killers with a more humane representation. And they succeed in Fergus, who is a sympathetic character and not a violent psychopath. However, the stereotype of the IRA

lives on in Jude with a distinctly misogynist twist. It is Jude, and the IRA she has come to represent, who is, through her violence, associated with the scorpion. In contrast, Dil's violence—motivated by her love for Jody and Fergus—is not condemned like Jude's nationalist violence because it is aligned with appropriate feminine motives. The IRA becomes gendered here as “the other woman” who will take Fergus away from Dil as national commitments conflict with personal ones. As is true in many films about the IRA, such as *In the Name of the Father* (1994) and *Some Mother's Son* (1996), the personal is represented as that which should override the nationalist commitment.<sup>71</sup>

In *The Crying Game* then, it is Dil who functions as the woman in Sedgwick's triangle to reinforce the bond between Fergus and Jody, and it is Jude—female, Irish, nationalist, brutal, and unfeeling—who must be disciplined and expelled from the narrative. And expelled she is in a brutal and much-discussed scene where Dil shoots her multiple times at close range. Rather than addressing any of the political and historical reasons the IRA exists, the film participates in the tradition of representing the Irish as inherently violent and, as Martin McLoone argues, by omitting any motivation for the violence “recycle[s] the myth of atavism.”<sup>72</sup> The romantic triangle works perfectly as a vehicle to illustrate which traits and identities should be included and which should be excluded.

Although its origins are Irish, *The Crying Game* participates in the Hollywood trend of the early 1990s that vilified women (*Basic Instinct*, *Fatal Attraction*) and produced a new breed of masculinity (*Parenthood*, *Terminator II*).<sup>73</sup> Frank Rich has called this body of work “Clintonian cinema” because it coincided with Bill Clinton's election and reflects the type of masculinity he represented at the time: compassionate,

caring, pacifist, and “in touch with his feminine side.”<sup>74</sup> *The Crying Game*, Rich argues, along with films such as *A Few Good Men*, elevates these qualities. Fergus’ masculinity and identity are reconstructed through his experiences with Jody and Dil—he learns tolerance of difference and questions his own allegiances through these interactions. However this exploration takes place on and through the bodies of queer characters of color. Thus, while *The Crying Game*’s representation of gender and nationalism can look radical on the surface, when these representations are contextualized in traditions they participate in—the IRA as brutal killers, transgressive women who must be punished, murderous transvestites, and recuperated masculinity—they look far less progressive.

As I have demonstrated, while the romance between Fergus and Jody challenges nationalist homophobia, in the end, the queer national romances in *The Crying Game* construct an allegory of England and Ireland’s union based on extensive exclusions. Although I am not the first to argue that *The Crying Game* works in misogynist and anti-nationalist ways as it reconstructs masculinity, my reading makes clear the ways Jordan’s formal choices as he queered the national romance are responsible for those reactionary political messages. It is *The Crying Game*’s formal and narrative choices—its focus on rehabilitating one central character, its unselfconscious use of the national romance, and its inclusion of the romantic triangle—that determine its political content. In its desire to rehabilitate Fergus and recast his masculinity, the film vilifies Jude and ascribes all negative characteristics associated with masculinity and nationalism to her, re-staging the colonial allegory with Jude as the third party who must be expelled. Unlike *The Crying Game*, *My Beautiful Laundrette* is interested in a variety of marginalized identities and political struggles in their own right, not merely as a backdrop to humanize one man.

Even more significantly, although both films queer the national romance, *The Crying Game* does not otherwise ironize or comment on the form. *My Beautiful Laundrette*'s meta-commentary on the national romance through its fantasy space enables it to avoid the "pretty lies" Sommer warns us about. Rather, it sustains a political critique as it asks audiences to re-imagine the nation.

---

<sup>1</sup> *My Beautiful Laundrette*, DVD, directed by Stephen Frears (Orion Classics, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> *The Crying Game*, DVD, directed by Neil Jordan (Miramax, 1992); *Fire*, DVD, directed by Deepa Mehta (Zeitgeist Films, 1996); *Borstal Boy*, DVD, directed by Peter Sheridan (Strand, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, Qtd. in Sarita Malik, "Beyond 'The Cinema of Duty'? The Pleasure of Hybridity: Black British Film of the 1980s and 1990s," in *Dissolving Views: Key Writings in British Cinema*, ed. Andrew Higson, 202-215 (London: Cassell, 1996), 214.

<sup>4</sup> *Brideshead Revisited*, DVD, directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg (Granada Television, 1981); *Chariots of Fire*, DVD, directed by Hugh Hudson (Warner Bros., 1981); *A Passage to India*, DVD, directed by David Lean (Columbia Pictures, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1995), 275.

<sup>6</sup> Anna Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Section 28 prohibited any entity that received government funding from "promoting homosexuality." Although it was a redundant law that in actuality had no power, it caused self-censoring among many government agencies, schools, universities, and arts organizations. I discuss Section 28 in more detail in my next chapter.

<sup>9</sup> Leonard Quart, "The Politics of Irony: The Frears-Kureishi Films," in *Re-Viewing British*

*Cinema, 1900-1992*, ed. Wheeler Dixon, 241-8 (Albany: State U of New York P, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> *Handsworth Songs*, videocassette, directed by John Akomfrah (Black Audio Collective, 1986); *The Last of England*, videocassette, directed by Derek Jarman (Film Four, 1987); *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, videocassette, directed by Stephen Frears (Cinecom Pictures, 1988); *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, DVD, directed by Peter Greenaway (Miramax, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s: Issues and Themes* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1999), 54.

<sup>12</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and the Rainbow Sign* (London: Faber, 1986), 41.

- 
- <sup>13</sup> *Playing Away*, videocassette, directed by Horace Ove (Channel 4 Films, 1987).
- <sup>14</sup> Kobena Mercer, "Recoding Narratives of Race and Nation," in *Black Film, British Cinema*, ICA Documents, 4-14 (London: British Film Institute, 1988), 4.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>16</sup> Mahmood Jamal, "Dirty Linen," in *Black Film, British Cinema*, ICA Documents, 21-22 (London: British Film Institute, 1988), 21.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.
- <sup>18</sup> Quoted in Bakirathi Mani and Sandip Roy, "In Charge of His Own Definitions: A Conversation with Hanif Kureishi," *Trikone* (July 2001): 6-7.
- <sup>19</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid: The Screenplay and the Screenwriter's Diary* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 65.
- <sup>20</sup> Malik, 209.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> Sandip Roy, *Trikone*, (July 2001): 2.
- <sup>23</sup> Gordon Warnecke, "Moving on From Listerine Kisses," *Trikone* (July 2001): 9.
- <sup>24</sup> As recently as January 2004, the *Advocate* named *My Beautiful Laundrette* one of the ten best gay or lesbian films of all time.
- <sup>25</sup> *Victim*, DVD, directed by Basil Dearden (Pathe-America Distribution, 1961).
- <sup>26</sup> Quoted in Mani and Roy, 6.
- <sup>27</sup> Julian Henriques, "Realism and the New Language," in *Black Film, British Cinema*, ICA Documents 18-20 (London: British Film Institute, 1988), 19.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> *Looking for Langston*, videocassette, directed by Isaac Julien (Third World Newsreel, 1989).
- <sup>30</sup> Judith Williamson, "Two Kinds of Otherness," in *Black Film, British Cinema*, ICA Documents, 33-35 (London: British Film Institute, 1988), 34.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.
- <sup>32</sup> Kureishi, *The Rainbow Sign*, 38.
- <sup>33</sup> Hill, 218.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> *My Son the Fanatic*, DVD, directed by Udayan Prasad (BBC, 1997); Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (New York: Penguin, 1990); Hanif Kureishi, *The Black Album* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995). For more on the theme of interracial relationships in Kureishi's work see Kenneth Kaleta, *Hanif Kureishi: Postcolonial Storyteller* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1998).
- <sup>36</sup> Susan Torrey Barber, "Insurmountable Difficulties and Moments of Ecstasy: Crossing Class, Ethnic, and Sexual Barriers in the Films of Stephen Frears," in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. Lester Friedman, 311-328 (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993), 326.
- <sup>37</sup> Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000), 286.
- <sup>38</sup> Kevin Rockett, "Culture, Industry and Irish Cinema," in *Border Crossing: Film in Ireland, Britain and Europe*, ed. Martin McLoone and Paul Hainsworth, 126-39 (Ulster: Institute of Irish Studies, 1994).

---

<sup>39</sup> The film was nominated for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor (Stephen Rea), Best Supporting Actor (Jaye Davidson), Best Editor, and Best Original Screenplay, the only award it won.

<sup>40</sup> The decision to reopen the board came just hours after Jordan's award was announced and took place at the Irish Film Center where an all-night Academy Awards party had been going on.

<sup>41</sup> Rockett, Kevin, Luke Gibbons, and John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1988), 147.

<sup>42</sup> *Waking Ned Divine*, DVD, directed by Kirk Jones (Twentieth Century Fox, 1998).

<sup>43</sup> Martin McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2000); Sarah Edge, "Women are trouble, did you know that Fergus?" Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*," *Feminist Review* 50 (Summer 1995): 173-186; Kristin Handler, "Sexing *The Crying Game*: Difference, Identity, Ethics," *Film Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 31-42; Mark Simpson, *Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity* (London: Cassell, 1994).

<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Ireland's Others: Ethnicity and Gender in Irish Literature and Popular Culture* (South Bend, Ind.: U of Notre Dame P, 2001); Lori Rogers, *Feminine Nation: Performance, Gender and Resistance in the Works of John McGahern and Neil Jordan* (Lanham, Md.: UP of America, 1998); and Simpson.

<sup>45</sup> Cullingford, Jane Giles, and Maria Pramaggiore all discuss the same-sex union in *The Crying Game*, but they do not fully explore its uses. Cullingford; Jane Giles, *The Crying Game* (London: British Film Institute, 1997); Maria Pramaggiore, "I Kinda Liked You as a Girl": Masculinity, Postcolonial Queens, and the "Nature" of Terrorism in Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*," in *Contemporary Irish Cinema from The Quiet Man to Dancing at Lughnasa*, ed. James MacKillop, 87-97 (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1999).

<sup>46</sup> *Michael Collins*, DVD, directed by Neil Jordan (Warner Bros, 1996); *The Butcher Boy*, videocassette, directed by Neil Jordan (Warner Bros., 1998).

<sup>47</sup> Giles, 9. This illustrates how Jordan was not interested in exploring the Northern Irish context per se, but instead using it as a backdrop for a story about individuals in a conflict.

<sup>48</sup> Brendan Behan, *The Hostage* (New York: Grove Press, 1958); Frank O'Connor, *Guests of the Nation* (New York: Macmillan, 1931).

<sup>49</sup> Bernard MacLaverty, *Cal* (New York: Norton, 1995); *Cal*, videocassette, directed by Pat O'Connor (Warner Bros., 1984).

<sup>50</sup> Giles, 25.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Giles, 40. Both Jordan and actor Stephen Rea have responded to these criticisms by saying they meant to create a humanizing portrait of an IRA member, but not to advocate the IRA or their violent acts. Jordan in particular says he has attempted to stay out of political debates, and, after being criticized for his depiction of paramilitary violence in *Angel*, declared: "Irish politics are quite complex and I felt the place to make a comment on them wasn't in a feature film" (qtd. in Giles, 41).

<sup>55</sup> Geoff Brown, review of *The Crying Game*, *Times* (London), October 29, 1992.



---

<sup>56</sup> This reviewer condemns the film as pro-IRA, saying, “Further, the whole film seems to assume a sympathy for the IRA that even a good many Irish people, north and south, do not share.” Stanley Kaufmann, review of *The Crying Game*, *New Republic*, December 14, 1992.

<sup>57</sup> Hal Hinson, review of *The Crying Game*, *Washington Post*, December 18, 1992.

<sup>58</sup> Alex Ross, review of *The Crying Game*, *New Republic*, March 1, 1993.

<sup>59</sup> Judith Halberstam, “*The Crying Game*,” in *The Ultimate Guide to Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, ed. Jenni Olson (New York: Serpent’s Tail, 1996).

<sup>60</sup> bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 53-62.

<sup>61</sup> Edge.

<sup>62</sup> Although the IRA is far from the only nationalist position in Ireland, the film fails to provide other representations of nationalist discourse. Therefore the only nationalist position the film depicts is presented as brutal and illegitimate and is contrasted with an apolitical liberal humanism represented by the union between Dil and Fergus.

<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, “Gender, Sexuality and Englishness in Modern Irish Drama and Film,” in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, ed. Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, 159-86 (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1997), 176.

<sup>64</sup> In fact, even reviewers in mainstream papers find the couple likable. Hal Hinson claims, “against all odds, we believe in the couple's continuing relationship” while Roger Ebert states, “we can’t help liking them.”

<sup>65</sup> The image is also a particularly effective metaphor for Ireland and England—two nations whose histories are intertwined, who are in close proximity to one another, and yet who are often political antagonists.

<sup>66</sup> Mark Simpson gives a persuasive analysis of the film’s homophobia; I disagree, however, with his dismissal of the romance between Dil and Fergus.

<sup>67</sup> The parable of the frog and the scorpion is significant in terms of the discourses of gender *The Crying Game* constructs and circulates. Initially, Jody tells Fergus the story of a frog who trusts a scorpion to ride on its back across the river and is consequently stung as a way of explaining that he understands the IRA will kill him. At the film’s conclusion, Fergus repeats the story to Dil as an explanation of why he takes the blame for her murder of Jude: we do what is in our nature. The story functions structurally as repetition, to provide closure, and as evidence of the completion of the transfer of Dil between the two men. It is also the story of a union of antagonists who must rely on each other to survive, another apt metaphor for England and Northern Ireland.

<sup>68</sup> Another choice Jordan could have made would have been to end the film with Boy George’s version of “The Crying Game,” a song that plays during the credits. This would have altered the tone of the ending dramatically emphasizing the tragedy of the lovers’ six-year separation, and also opened up a space for homoerotic desire because of Boy George’s well-known homosexuality.

<sup>69</sup> See Orla Walsh’s *The Visit* and Jim Sheridan’s *The Boxer* for two very different portrayals of prisoners’ wives.

<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, Jordan wrote three different endings for *The Crying Game*. Two ended as the film does now with Fergus in jail and Dil visiting him. The other closed with the couple escaping together to Barbados. Jordan wrote this happier ending in response to

---

complaints about the first end's ambiguity. Eventually, however, Jordan and others involved with the production felt that this whimsical conclusion did not do justice to the film's complexity and mood, and the final scene in jail was shot. Giles, 37.

<sup>71</sup> *In the Name of the Father*, DVD, directed by Jim Sheridan (UIP, 1994); *Some Mother's Son*, videocassette, directed by Terry George (Abbey Films, 1996).

<sup>72</sup> McLoone, 84.

<sup>73</sup> Edge, 183.

<sup>74</sup> Giles, 149.

## 2. Imperial Cruising: National Romance and National Melancholy in *The Swimming-Pool Library*

[We] assert that the pervasive losses of the twentieth century are laden with creative, political potential. [We] insist that, if loss is known only by what remains of it, then the politics and ethics of mourning lie in the interpretation of what remains—how remains are produced and animated, how they are read and sustained.<sup>1</sup>

In the previous chapter I argued that *My Beautiful Laundrette* inaugurated the genre of films I call the queer national romance.<sup>2</sup> That chapter presented case studies of two very different examples of the genre in order to demonstrate how a text's formal choices determine, in part, the ideological work it is able to do. While *My Beautiful Laundrette* imagines a new England healed from the racial and class tensions dividing it, the film never forgets that this space exists only in fantasy; thus, it provides audiences with a vision to work towards without glossing over the material realities of postcolonial London. *The Crying Game*, however, adheres to the traditional romance's tendency towards closure, and the film's neat wrapping up of loose ends in a romance between political adversaries erases the very real struggles it purports to address.<sup>3</sup> In the process, *The Crying Game* creates a deeply misogynist allegory out of a romantic triangle that not only excludes women but also brutally expels them.

In this chapter I turn my attention from film to literature and consider Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), a novel that chronicles many romances but does not position audiences to invest in any of them.<sup>4</sup> Instead, these various romances are contrasted with one another to illustrate the continuity of particular forms of upper-class white male desire for black and working-class men and the persistence of using romance to narrate resolutions to national conflicts. Rather than employing the queer national romance to tell its story, however, Hollinghurst takes the form (and its

predecessor the national romance) as his subject, revising, critiquing, and even parodying it. By frustrating our expectations of resolution, the novel positions us to see the genre's narrative strategies critically, to be more aware of the ways it was used by gay writers in the past, and to acknowledge its limitations as well as its appeal. The queer national romance, *The Swimming-Pool Library* demonstrates, is one of the many erotic legacies of Empire still with us.

Early in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Hollinghurst alerts readers that this is a novel about the remains of Empire. In this scene, the elderly Lord Charles Nantwich takes the promiscuous young aristocrat Will Beckwith into his basement to see a Roman pavement that lies beneath the house. Evidently the floor of a Roman bath, the fragmentary mosaic depicts a male figure—possibly Neptune or the Thames god—looking down at two boys swimming. While Charles sees the mosaic as evidence of “how all those lusty young Romans went leaping about,” Will takes a more romantic view of the two boys (94). According to Charles, these two young legionnaires illustrate the homoeroticism present in the Roman military and suggest a history of male same-sex desire reaching back to Roman colonization of England. Will, on the other hand, does not see beyond the formal and the aesthetic and reads the pair ahistorically as representations of sublime beauty. These two different readings of the same image reveal Hollinghurst's interest in how the mosaic—and, by extension, other images of male unions—are open to multiple interpretations and can be used for various ends. By juxtaposing Charles' and Will's divergent interpretations, Hollinghurst demonstrates his desire to interrogate the often-reproduced artistic and literary image of the male union. Consequently, instead of

being given any one fixed reading of the mosaic, readers are invited to question how we make meaning as we interpret images.

Although the relationship between the young Romans remains ambiguous, the mosaic's significance in the novel is clear: Hollinghurst chooses to embody this trace of a Roman presence in London in the image of two young men bathing, just as *The Swimming-Pool Library* will tell the history of twentieth-century England through other narratives and images of unions between men. Through these portraits, the novel charts England's shifting relationship to homosexuality and explores the relationship between Empire and homoeroticism. Furthermore, the depictions of various same-sex romances draw attention to the homosocial and homosexual relationships that, the novel argues, structured British society throughout the twentieth century. These romantic unions between men exist beneath the surface of almost every cultural institution that reproduces British national identity—public school, university, colonial service, and artistic movements such as modernism—and visual representations of these relationships appear throughout *The Swimming-Pool Library*. Even the architecture of London, which Hollinghurst describes in great detail, is replete with images of male unions. By drawing attention to these representations, the novel implies that romantic and sexual bonds between men, such as those depicted in the Roman mosaic in Charles' basement, are the structures upon which the British nation was built.

As it constructs a history of homosexual desire in England, *The Swimming-Pool Library* reveals how tied that history is to imperialism. With its image of bathing Roman soldiers, the mosaic highlights the homoerotic legacies of Empire, a focus that continues throughout the novel, most explicitly in Charles' descriptions of his life as a district

commissioner in the Sudan. Moreover, the mosaic's status as a remnant of the Roman Empire that is literally hidden beneath London and accessible to only a select group illustrates the novel's implicit argument that the histories of imperialism and homoerotic desire lie just beneath the surface of modern-day London. The mosaic, therefore, reflects the novel's structure—it is a blend of Charles' and Will's narratives—as well as foregrounds one of its main themes: hidden or obscured histories and the often-contested interpretations of those histories. What, the novel positions us to wonder as we envision the mosaic, are the erotic legacies of Empire? And what sexual worlds are hidden beneath the surfaces of the world we see around us everyday? Most importantly for this chapter, however, the mosaic asks us to think about how we interpret the remains of Empire, specifically the artistic and literary images of male unions that so often serve as its metaphors.

By re-imagining the history of the British Empire as queer, *The Swimming-Pool Library* engages with debates about gay men's status as citizens, debates which were especially heated at the time Hollinghurst wrote the novel because of the homophobic Section 28 of the Local Government Act being proposed in Parliament. Section 28 contained the rather vague prohibition that local governments could not support any projects by groups that "promoted" homosexuality. Gay culture was under attack; yet rather than placating queer activists and literary critics by presenting a portrait of innocent gay victims of social injustice, the novel depicts men who are both agents of Empire and gay, inserting them into the racist and classist fabric of imperialism. The novel does more, however, than simply include queer characters in its depiction of

twentieth-century British history; it also engages with the long-standing literary tradition of using male unions as metaphors for Empire.

Hollinghurst, however, refuses the typical narrative of reconciliation that these earlier texts, with their image of a mutually beneficial relationship between men, used to justify Empire. The conflicts *The Swimming-Pool Library* addresses— colonialism, decolonization, racial prejudice, classism, and the Falklands/Malvinas War—are never resolved in the narrative. Rather than narrating Empire through stories where crises are resolved in a romance, *The Swimming-Pool Library* creates national allegories out of Will's and Charles' *failed* romances and sexual encounters. Although both Charles and Will become enamored with and pursue various young men of color, these encounters inevitably self-destruct in one way or another way leaving our protagonists despairing and adrift. A particularly apt narrative strategy here, the thwarted romances reflect the loss of Empire and the failure of both national unity and the assimilation of postcolonial subjects in the novel's present.

Thus, instead of structuring its story as a romance and positioning the audience to desire a union between its lovers, *The Swimming-Pool Library* attempts to produce melancholy in readers by making us experience, along with Charles and Will, feelings of failure and loss. Like the typical national romance the novel relies on affect, but instead of creating a longing in readers its love stories are meant to engender sadness, frustration, or even repulsion and disgust. The novel's series of failed romances serve another purpose as well: they continuously thwart our narrative expectations, making us aware of the conventions we assume. While the queer national romance often seduces readers, *The Swimming-Pool Library's* romance narratives create a distance between readers and the

text that allows readers to see both the appeal and the limitations of imagining the nation or Empire as a romantic union between two men.<sup>5</sup> While the image of colonizer and colonized uniting in harmony via a romance can be attractive, it often masks inequality and celebrates a false unity. Consequently, Hollinghurst employs the romance self-consciously throughout the novel; while some characters like Charles invoke the tradition unironically, the novel itself often critiques or parodies it. Thus, as well as positioning us to revise how we read earlier texts that employ some of the strategies of the queer national romance—texts like *A Passage to India*—*The Swimming-Pool Library* constructs a critique of the genre that future texts must grapple with.<sup>6</sup>

A bildungsroman and a mystery of sorts, *The Swimming-Pool Library* sets up a complex series of plot machinations whereby Will meets the elderly Lord Charles Nantwich, strikes up a friendship with him and, eventually, is asked to write his biography. From that point on, the novel juxtaposes entries from Charles' diaries from the 1920s to the 1950s with Will's narration as he cruises his way through London in 1983, creating a mosaic as it makes connections between gay male cultures in different historical moments. By chronicling each man's romantic and sexual relationships with other men—especially the black and working-class white men they both prefer—the novel establishes a parallel between Will and Charles. As he unravels the web of connections between his life and Charles' past, Will is educated about his own position, his extreme privilege and his real vulnerability as a wealthy, out gay man. In this way, the novel reveals homosexuality as both intrinsic to British culture and consistently persecuted by English law. Moreover, the novel exposes how Will's privilege is based on the persecution of other gay men when it reveals that Will's grandfather derived much of



his wealth and prestige from his role as public prosecutor during the anti-gay pogroms of the 1950s.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, Will discovers that his grandfather was responsible for sending Charles to jail in 1954 for soliciting and conspiracy to commit indecent acts. The novel juxtaposes this event with the police entrapment of Will's best friend James, in the novel's present in 1983, demonstrating that this kind of state-sanctioned homophobia continues. *The Swimming-Pool Library* ends with Will explaining to Charles that he cannot write his biography now that he is aware of his own family's role in Charles' misfortunes; however, the novel itself is in a sense a version of that document: the intertwined histories of these two men and their desires.

In what follows, I begin by describing *The Swimming-Pool Library's* acknowledgement of and engagement with the literary legacy of the national romance. I then discuss current theories about national melancholy which, I argue, can help us better understand the novel's depiction of the many erotic legacies of Empire. Next I compare the novel's treatment of various romances—each of which represents a different national crisis related to Empire—in order to illustrate how Hollinghurst critiques the genre. First, I close read a romance between Will and his young black lover, Arthur, that serves as a metaphor for postcolonial London and the racial violence of the 1980s. Next I analyze a long-term romance between Charles and his Sudanese servant, Taha, that allegorizes the end of colonization and the beginning of decolonization. Finally, I discuss two brief sexual encounters that occur late in the novel, each of which attempts to use the queer national romance to stage the relationship between nations at war. Specifically, a tryst between Charles and an African-American soldier is depicted as an attempt to ameliorate the prejudice faced by black soldiers in WWII, an encounter between Will and an

Argentinean man fails to provide sufficient reparations for British military aggression in the Falklands/Malvinas War. I argue that Will's inability to have sex with the Argentine illustrates what happens when the power dynamic between colonizer and past colonial subject is reversed. In closing, I turn from what *The Swimming-Pool Library* critiques to what it advocates as I tease out what the novel argues gay male culture and same-sex love can produce.

### **“Men of All Nations”: a Literary Legacy**

The representation of Empire figured as a union between two men looms everywhere in *The Swimming-Pool*, even in the architecture of London. For instance, we see it in the statuary that adorns the doorway of the Corry, the club where both Will and Charles swim and cruise men:

At the center it gathers to a curvaceous, broken-pedimented doorway surmounted by two finely developed figures—one pensively Negroid, the other inspiringly Caucasian—who hold between them a banner with the device ‘Men of All Nations.’ (12)

Will's description of this statuary exposes both the Victorian racism of the architecture and Will's own homoerotic paternalism. These two “finely developed figures,” one black and one white represent, it quickly becomes apparent from the narrative, a romantic and sexual union between men from different nations and races. Just as the statue posits the Negroid figure as “pensive” and the Caucasian as “inspired,” these unions always contain an inequality that romance masks. For instance, while Charles' union with his Sudanese servant Taha is a loving one that Charles describes as like that of a marriage, it is also a relationship based on one man's service to another.

Yet it is the literary, and not the architectural or artistic, deployment of the homoerotic union as allegory that most concerns *The Swimming-Pool Library*. Although past writers have imagined the national romance via male unions—most famously, Forster in *A Passage to India*—few have made these relationships explicitly sexual. Hollinghurst wrote his doctoral dissertation on the importance of homosexuality in the writings of Forster, Ronald Firbank, and L.P. Hartley, and he is well-versed in the literary tradition of writers (particularly gay male writers) using the same-sex, cross-class, or interracial couple as a metaphor for national union. Given Hollinghurst’s style and formal concerns, it is unsurprising that he seeks to revise this trope so often employed by gay British writers from the earlier part of the century:

I guess I am quite a bookish writer; I’m fairly self-conscious from a literary point of view. So I actually take a kind of constructive pleasure in redeploing established literary situations. It would have been curiously innocent to have written such a story without [such references].<sup>8</sup>

Thus, revising old narrative strategies which use metaphor to obscure homoerotic desire is one of his goals in the novel: “*The Swimming-Pool Library* grew in part out of that thesis: the idea of juxtaposing what couldn’t be said with something that could now be said loud and clear; the contrast between concealment and display.”<sup>9</sup> In the early part of the twentieth century, Hollinghurst explains, depictions of sex between men were confined to pornography or “dealt with so archly or metaphorically that you weren’t sure what was going on.”<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, *The Swimming-Pool Library* depicts the Corry as a cruising ground for “men of all nations,” and both Will and Charles make literal the sexual potential of the slogan. Will, in particular, has sexual encounters with many men from various classes, races, and nationalities at the Corry. By portraying the Corry as a sexual

playground “with brother clubs in all the major cities of the world,” and highlighting the doorway’s visual representation of interracial and international union, Hollinghurst reveals the homoeroticism and paternalistic racism that often accompanied these unions embedded in the institutions and even the very architecture of Empire. It is through these representations of male interracial romance that the novel does its most important political work: linking the neocolonial late twentieth century with the colonial past. As it does so, the novel challenges the belief that England has eradicated the prejudices and systemic injustices of the colonial era by demonstrating the persistence of imperial dynamics in gay culture.

*The Swimming-Pool Library* comments on the queer national romance most explicitly through the parallels it establishes between Will’s and Charles’ desires. Although the novel is concerned with their desire for both working-class and black men, I focus primarily on the interracial unions that, I argue, function as metaphors of the British Empire in the novel. While Charles’ descriptions of his desire for black men has an idealized and almost religious quality as well as a sexual component, Will’s encounters with black men in the 1980s are unabashedly based on sex and exploitation. However, for all their differences, there are similarities between their desires as well: both Charles and Will fetishize black men and both express a need to “save” their less-privileged lovers. By juxtaposing these two characters’ desires, Hollinghurst exposes the queer national romance as a fantasy that hides racial and class exploitation, whether in its older, idealized form from the earlier part of the century or in its sexualized late twentieth-century manifestation. By depicting interracial relationships in the 1980s as continuous

with those from the earlier part of the twentieth century, the novel illuminates the vestiges of imperial dynamics that persist in postcolonial England.

In this chapter, I argue that *The Swimming-Pool Library* exhibits a melancholic relationship to the past in order to illustrate that England has not abandoned imperial dynamics. I believe the novel engages melancholically with two aspects of Empire: the sexual and romantic access to black men that colonialism provided for white gay men and the literary form that used these interracial relationships as a metaphor for Empire—Forster’s type of muted national romance. Many critics, on the other hand, see the novel as an elegy to the past, specifically to eras and forms of gay community which no longer exist, such as the period between the wars with its underground network of gay men and in the pre-AIDS era London and its many public cruising spaces. For instance, Joseph Bristow sees the text as “a troubling work of mourning for a brief period of liberated sexual practices that—in the light of the epidemic—came to an end.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, David Alderson sees a “generalized condition of nostalgia in the novel” and discusses its “elegiac qualities.”<sup>12</sup> While these analyses correctly note *The Swimming-Pool Library*’s obsession with the past, they misunderstand the novel’s relation to history. Neither an elegy nor a work of mourning, *The Swimming-Pool Library* can best be understood as a work that engages in national melancholy as it links the imperial dynamics present in gay British culture in the early twentieth century to the 1980s.

While mourning places a lost object firmly in the past and regards it nostalgically, insisting that it can no longer be found in the present, melancholy keeps the object “alive.” *The Swimming-Pool Library*’s many lost objects—past eras, particular forms of gay male community, and individual characters’ lost loves—are depicted not as lost, but

as still alive in the present of the novel. While elegy and other expressions of mourning would place imperialism in the past as a lost object to be remembered, melancholy illustrates how it continues to operate in interracial scenes of desire in the present. Since melancholy is an affective attachment to the past that does not work through grief, it is a way of keeping the legacy of imperialism in gay culture in view so that it can be acknowledged and perhaps critiqued.

Hollinghurst, however, seems less interested in critiquing imperial forms of desire than he is in illustrating how they are an endemic part of gay British life and, perhaps, British culture in general. While he demonstrates that interracial desire has always been imbricated with imperialism, he does not pose an alternative or imagine a space in which this could be different, as Hanif Kureishi does in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Some critics see this lack of a redemptive or utopic vision as the novel's greatest contribution, while others are disturbed by the pessimism and read it as endorsing the racism it seems to critique. Joseph Bristow argues the former position:

Nothing about this novel is politically pure. Never does it capitulate to a didactic critique of the literary models to which it is so self-consciously an heir. Instead, this narrative positively embraces the stereotypical patterns of gay men's lives to remind us that they now belong to the past, and to which the present narrative marks an ending.<sup>13</sup>

Alan Sinfield, on the other hand, claims "My own sense is that received modes of gay fantasy are more entrenched than [Bristow's] interpretation would suggest, and it is rash to suppose that they are on the point of being abandoned."<sup>14</sup> Sinfield's observation corrects Bristow's optimistic belief that the imperial dynamics the novel chronicles are a thing of the past. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, melancholy is the alternative to

mourning and nostalgia that *The Swimming-Pool Library* uses as a way of keeping the problematic dynamics of both imperialism and the national romance visible.

### **Ghosts and Specters: Imperial Remains**

The development of an indigenous British racism in the post-war period *begins* with the profound historical forgetfulness—what I want to call the loss of historical memory, a kind of historical amnesia, a decisive mental repression—which has overtaken the British people about race and Empire since the 1950s. Paradoxically, it seems to me, the native, home-grown variety of racism begins with this attempt to wipe out and efface every trace of the colonial and imperial past.<sup>15</sup>

The loss of the Empire was intensely traumatic for the British. For over two centuries they had conceived of themselves as an imperial power; for one hundred years they were an Empire upon which the sun never set. Britain defined itself through its colonies rhetorically and in the national imagination, and also relied on them financially for raw materials, labor, and trade. Then, as its last colonies gained their independence in the 1960s, Britain was transformed from an Empire into a small island nation in the north Atlantic. Decolonization was all the more traumatic, Anna Marie Smith points out, because conservative discourses constructed the colonies, retrospectively, as always having been extraneous to the British nation. For example, Enoch Powell, a Conservative Member of Parliament in the 1960s and 1970s, redefined the colonized as “immigrants” and unwelcome visitors in a land they had helped to create.<sup>16</sup> This mis-remembering was necessary for the British because, “if [the English] continued to believe that the strength of their nation had depended on its ability to dominate the colonies, then de-colonization would only signify an end to British greatness.”<sup>17</sup> The great loss that decolonization represented for the British was, therefore, rarely acknowledged in either the political

rhetoric or the national imagination. Smith argues that Britain suppressed the trauma: “If de-colonization amounted to the traumatic loss of a necessary supplement, like the loss of a vital body part, then Powell’s representation of the Empire as an accidental irrelevance amounts to a strategic suppression of the trauma.”<sup>18</sup> As Stuart Hall argues, the subsequent “historical amnesia” led to a specific form of racism with a number of different manifestations, including rising levels of violence against people of color.

Another effect of this suppression of the trauma of decolonization for the English can be seen in the thriving heritage industry and the Raj nostalgia that emerged in the 1980s and portrayed the Empire in all its glory. Films and television serials such as *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *A Passage to India* (1984), and *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984) reaffirm the Empire’s majestic past.<sup>19</sup> Although some of these texts criticize the abuses of Empire on a narrative level, they often dwell on imperial splendor cinematically and therefore send a mixed message.<sup>20</sup> The trend of obsessively documenting England’s past international prominence continues today, albeit somewhat differently, with productions like Masterpiece Theatre’s *Manor House*.<sup>21</sup> The 1980s, however, were clearly a unique period when national crises led England to continuously re-imagine Empire nostalgically, both in its popular culture and its political rhetoric, a phenomenon illustrated by Margaret Thatcher’s constant harkening back to “Victorian values.”<sup>22</sup>

While Raj nostalgia, the heritage industry, and heritage films have been thoroughly taken to task by film and cultural critics, the underlying factors that caused this turn to imperial nostalgia have not been adequately theorized.<sup>23</sup> Christopher Lane argues that a failure to acknowledge the loss of Empire led to a “commemorative nostalgia”:



[A]ddressing Britain's colonial past has acquired considerable urgency in light of that country's refusal to relinquish its historical and psychic investment in its Empire. At present, Britain appears to have suspended this issue; it is neither forgotten nor entirely regretted. In Freud's rather schematic account of grief, Britain's situation would appear closer to melancholia than mourning, because it has yet to record the Empire as a lost and irretrievable object; Britain's repetition of commemorative nostalgia signifies conservative blockage, not cultural process. . . . A recurrent faith that Britain can and should return to a position of international dominance inaugurates this national melancholy.<sup>24</sup>

Lane characterizes England in the 1980s as caught in a kind of nostalgia that he sees as a "national melancholy." England must move beyond this melancholy and mourn, he argues, if it is to adequately move on from the past.

However, recent approaches to mourning argue that melancholy is not the pathological attachment it was once seen to be. According to these critics, melancholy can be a productive way of handling loss. All theories of mourning are grounded in Freud's explanation of mourning and melancholy as two distinct reactions to grief:

Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on. As an effect of the same influences, melancholia instead of a state of grief develops in some people, whom we consequently suspect of a morbid psychological disposition.<sup>25</sup>

While Freud saw mourning as the "normal" reaction to loss and melancholy as a pathological response, recent approaches coming out of a variety of disciplines present melancholy in a new light. David Eng and Shinhee Han, for instance, attempt to depathologize melancholy and suggest its usefulness in understanding how immigrants experience the processes of assimilation.<sup>26</sup> They challenge the conception of melancholia as an individual pathology and construct it instead as both a group reaction and a productive force. Others such as Jose Munoz and Ann Cvetkovich stress melancholy's promise as a way of understanding the psychological responses of marginalized groups

like queers and people of color to unattainable ideals such as whiteness and heterosexuality.<sup>27</sup> Cvetkovich, in particular, attempts to revise how we conceive of reactions to loss and other traumas by noting their potential to produce art which can in turn lead to the formation of new public cultures. But how exactly is melancholy productive?

In their introduction to the recent anthology *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, David Eng and David Kazanjian argue that melancholy differs from mourning because it allows for an ongoing relation to the lost object and therefore to the past:

Unlike mourning, in which the past is declared resolved, finished, and dead, in melancholia the past remains steadfastly alive in the present. By engaging in “countless separate struggles” with loss, melancholia might be said to constitute, as Benjamin would describe it, an ongoing and open relationship with the past—bringing its ghosts and specters, its flaring and fleeting images, into the present.<sup>28</sup>

By not allowing the lost object to be forgotten and the ensuing grief to be “resolved,” melancholy keeps the past “steadfastly alive in the present.” Eng and Kazanjian argue that by keeping the relationship between past and present open, we can develop new ways of understanding the past. Of course, keeping victims of AIDS alive in our hearts and imaginations differs greatly from refusing to let go of a pernicious political system such as Empire, but while the impulses are very different from a moral and ethical standpoint, in both cases holding on to a lost object leads to a melancholic attachment to the past. What is the effect of holding on to the lost object? Or, in the case of *The Swimming-Pool Library*, what are the consequences of the novel’s melancholic engagement with the past? How does the novel interpret the remains of Empire?

Rather than advocating a mourning of Empire as Christopher Lane does, I would suggest melancholy as a productive way of understanding a text like *The Swimming-Pool*

*Library* which sets the present alongside the past as a way of examining Empire's legacies and "allows us to gain new perspectives on and understandings of lost objects."

This mode of representing history becomes especially significant in light of Walter Benjamin's assertion that we should not "fix" the past in one image:

"To articulate the past historically," Benjamin insists, "means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger . . . to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger." . . . Benjamin admonishes the historicist for seeking to grasp and hold on to the past, to cease its motion and fix a genuine historical image for all eternity [and] calls on us to seize hold of elusive histories that have been obscured by the historicist's genuine image, not in order to fix those histories and establish new genuine images or new eternal truths, but rather to allow lost pasts to step into the light of a present moment of danger.<sup>29</sup>

The historical moments the novel illuminates speak to the "present moments of danger" in 1980s England. The novel was written during a time of national crisis in Great Britain: massive unemployment, a rise in fascist organizations like the National Front, a consequent escalation in violence against people of color, and a homophobic backlash created a state of national emergency. As Britain suppressed the trauma of decolonization and redefined its former citizens as outsiders, some texts—most of the heritage films, for example—responded nostalgically. *The Swimming-Pool Library*, in contrast, allows "lost pasts to step into the light of a present moment of danger."

To be sure, the critical and anti-nostalgic relationship to history this novel establishes is no accident. Hollinghurst is very conscious of narrative strategies for recreating history and in interviews he has critiqued heritage cinema:

The whole fatuous cult of the, well, especially of the pre-First World War period but also of the interwar period, which I think has so enfeebled cinema: everybody's constantly in period costume and there's this whole spurious nostalgia for the Edwardian period. I'm very fed up with all these adaptations of Forster's books, where the treatment is so nostalgic and makes them seem so picturesque. All their point and sharpness gets taken straight out.<sup>30</sup>

Hollinghurst recreates the same time periods as many heritage films, but he attempts to represent history without recourse to nostalgia. In fact, *The Swimming-Pool Library* explicitly addresses this desire for a positive recreation of the past; at one point in the novel, Will describes his own “irresistible elegiac need for the tendernesses of an England long past” (143). Yet the novel complicates this desire and exposes it as an oversimplification of the past by supplying Will (and readers) with evidence of the gay pogroms and racist murders that were taking place in the 1950s. Nostalgia is shown but not allowed to pass uncriticized. Thus, *The Swimming-Pool Library* depicts the inequities of the two past eras it concentrates on as well as their distinct pleasures, and in this way, it displays not the nostalgically-rendered elegy —”the tendernesses of an England long past” that Will longs for—but national melancholy.

Consequently, the novel is not an elegy to either the sexual hedonism of London in the 1980s or the romantic, sentimental idealism of the period between the wars, but instead an anti-nostalgic representation which displays both a critique of and an affection for both eras as times that contained serious inequities yet also certain pleasures now gone. The novel sets up this attention to past eras in its first few pages as Will describes the time period he is living through as fleeting:

My life was in a strange way that summer, the last summer of its kind there ever was to be. I was riding high on sex and self-esteem—it was my time, my belle époque—but all the while with a faint flicker of calamity, like flames around a photograph, something seen out of the corner of the eye. (5-6)

Although AIDS is never mentioned in this novel, the “faint flicker of calamity” surely refers to the crisis about to come, a crisis Hollinghurst chronicles in detail in his most recent novel, *The Line of Beauty*.<sup>31</sup> In addition, however, the “calamity” referred to in the

above passage foreshadows the rude awakening to come due to Will's lack of awareness of his own vulnerability as a gay man and his blindness to the past. As the novel remembers a time before AIDS and before Will's knowledge of his own privileged but tenuous social position, it also notes the passing of particular formations of gay male culture prevalent in the early part of the twentieth century. The history of these gay cultures are imbricated with the history of Empire, as Hollinghurst adeptly illustrates, and it is by juxtaposing various time periods through comparisons between Will's and Charles' lives and loves that Hollinghurst illustrates the imperial dynamics still active in the 1980s.

**“The conspiracy of sex with men I had never seen before and might never see again”: Neocolonial Desire in the 1980s**

Constructing gay desire as intrinsic to British national culture was a particularly radical act in the political climate in which *The Swimming-Pool Library* was published—a moment of homophobic backlash in which Thatcher's conservative government sought to exclude gay and lesbian experiences from public discourse. Section 28 of the Local Government Act was the culmination of their efforts. As well as taking advantage of new fears about AIDS, this law drew on past political rhetoric. Just as the trope of the black immigrant had served as a scapegoat in the political rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s, a particular kind of queer subject was rhetorically constructed in the 1980s, one which worked in some familiar ways. Anna Marie Smith argues, “Without a thorough working through of the de-colonization trauma, the black immigrant becomes the post-colonial symptom” who becomes related through a “chain of associations” to the major social ills of the time—unemployment, inner cities' decline, and the inadequacy of

social services.<sup>32</sup> By 1988 the demonized figure threatening the social order had shifted, but Smith illustrates how right-wing rhetoric borrowed much of its depiction of the dangerous queer from earlier constructions of the figure of the black immigrant: both were figured as invader, predator, diseased person, and, most significantly, disrupter of the social order. This stigmatization was possible because of the newly-emerging fear of AIDS; the perception of AIDS as a gay plague contributed to the construction of the gay man as diseased. Right-wing rhetoric, furthermore, fanned the flames of homophobia by refiguring demands for gay and lesbian civil rights as calls for “special rights.” In Thatcher’s rhetoric, Smith argues, “Queerness became one of the enemy elements which supported the phantasmatic construction of the family as the antagonism-free centre of the British nation.”<sup>33</sup> The dangerous queer, like the black immigrant before him was, therefore, constructed as outside of the nation.<sup>34</sup> Imaginative work like Hollinghurst’s, which reinserted the gay man squarely inside the British nation, was especially subversive in this political climate.

Section 28 differs from previous British legislation that regulated homosexuality. Laws against homosexuality began in 1533 when King Henry VIII criminalized buggery and established its punishment as death. Homosexual behavior between consenting adults remained criminal in England until 1967. Rather than criminalizing acts, Section 28 sought to stop the “promotion” of homosexuality and exclude it from public discourse by prohibiting discussion of it in schools and denying funding to any art that mentioned it. Although it was a redundant act that in actuality had no power because another local government bill superseded it, Section 28 legitimated many instances of discrimination against gays and lesbians: gay teachers were suspended, lesbian and gay societies were

banned at universities, gay studies classes were cancelled, and library acquisitions were policed.<sup>35</sup> Section 28 had some less-predictable consequences as well. From its introduction in 1986 to its passage in 1988, the legislation was widely discussed in the media. During this period, discussions about homosexuality flourished, gay and lesbian activism thrived, and various political and artistic figures like Sir Ian MacKellan came out as gay or lesbian. Jackie Stacey argues,

The effect of the introduction of Section 28, then, contradicted its aims and produced an inadvertent promotion of homosexuality. Rather than silencing and marginalizing lesbians and gays, the introduction of Section 28 set in motion an unprecedented proliferation of activities which put homosexuality firmly on the agenda in Britain in 1988-9.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, Section 28 resulted in an outpouring of gay and lesbian cultural productions including *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Jeanette Winterson's novel *Sexing The Cherry* (1989), and films such as *Looking for Langston* (1989) and *Edward II* (1991).<sup>37</sup>

*The Swimming-Pool Library* responds to Section 28 in a unique way: rather than attempting to make gay men the heroes of the nation, the novel takes as its central character the figure most reviled in the political rhetoric supporting Section 28—the promiscuous gay man—and obsessively documents his sexual exploits. Not an assimilationist text which seeks to oppose homophobic representations with “positive images” of gay men, *The Swimming-Pool Library* challenges readers with a depiction of a man whose life revolves around, as he puts it, “sex with men I had never seen before and might never see again” (153). Hollinghurst's unapologetic, sexually-explicit descriptions of Will's exploits as he cruises his way across London contrasts many gay responses to the legislation which sought to circulate “positive images” of gay men. Thus, the novel avoids the traps that come with attempting to appease conservative

critics: the de-sexualizing of gays and lesbians and the demonization of sexual minorities within gay and lesbian communities.

Constructing Will as promiscuous was a risky strategy because it could have fed into conservative stereotypes of gay men as sexual predators; however, this strategy enabled the novel to legitimate a sexual culture that gay men had long fought for and to celebrate its pleasures. In an article about AIDS and activism that he wrote in 1989, Douglas Crimp reminds us of Freud's assertion that the loss of an abstraction such as fatherland or liberty, as well as the loss of a person, can lead to mourning or melancholy. Crimp then asks, "Can we be allowed to include in this 'civilized' list, the ideal of perverse sexual pleasure itself rather than one stemming from sublimation? Alongside the dismal toll of death, what many of us have lost is a culture of sexual possibility."<sup>38</sup> In response to AIDS, gay male culture changed drastically as many gay men abandoned and even stigmatized practices such as anonymous sex. Although this shift in the cultural landscape undoubtedly saved lives, it also resulted in significant, and at times unacknowledged, losses. In an editorial written approximately fifteen years after the AIDS crisis began, which was submitted to the *New York Times* but never published, Crimp again addresses the emotional impact of the loss of a sexual way of life:

Unlike other oppressed groups, we gay people do not acquire our culture as a birthright. We have to create it after we find our way out of the hostile environments we grow up in, often including our own families. Among our greatest achievements are the diverse possibilities we have invented for the expression and fulfillment of affectional and sexual relations. These possibilities are a function of our public world, overlapping communities of interest and desire, where we find each other and learn to care about each other. When that public realm shrinks...we lose much more than places for sex. We lose the places where our lives have taken on social meaning and made it possible for us to overcome the atomized, private, and often secret identities that most of us lived before finding others like ourselves.<sup>39</sup>



His words eloquently illustrate the importance that sexual publics have had for gay men in particular. Seen in this light, Hollinghurst's decision to document the pleasures of London's public sex culture in the pre-AIDS era performs a service as it archives often-stigmatized aspects of queer culture.

This archiving is particularly significant because the history of sexual and other affective practices can be so difficult to record. In an analysis of gay and lesbian archives Cvetkovich argues,

Lesbian and gay history demands a radical archive of emotion in order to document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism—all areas of experience that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive. Furthermore, gay and lesbian archives address the traumatic loss of history that has accompanied sexual life and the formation of sexual publics, and they assert the role of memory and affect in compensating for institutional neglect.<sup>40</sup>

She goes on to assert that fantasy must sometimes be interwoven with more traditional historical materials in order to document these neglected affective areas of queer culture. Although *The Swimming-Pool Library* is a novel and not a historical document per se, it seeks to reconstruct neglected histories of desire and the choice of Will as a narrator enables this documentation. Consequently, the novel unabashedly chronicles his summer of sex with strangers and the pleasures it brings:

Leading my life the way I did, it was strangers who by their very strangeness quickened my pulse and made me feel alive—that and the irrational sense of absolute security that came from the conspiracy of sex with men I had never seen before and might never see again. (153)

In part perhaps because one of the novel's goals is to depict the time of sexual freedom which existed in gay male culture before AIDS, it is not interested in policing any practices or fantasies. Instead of condemning any of Will's desires, therefore, the novel describes them and places the erotic and the exploitative side by side, allowing readers to

interpret them as they will. *The Swimming-Pool Library* represents the racist, classist elements of gay male culture in England in the 1980s in Will's relationship with his boyfriend Arthur and historicizes and contextualizes these desires in the neocolonial moment, linking them with Charles's colonial fantasies.

The novel begins as a chronicle of Will's tricks and lovers and centers on his relationships with two different men: Arthur, a seventeen-year-old black man who lives in the projects, and Phil, an eighteen-year-old white working-class hotel worker. Although he is only a few years their senior, Will constantly infantilizes and condescends to these men. In one particularly telling scene, Will describes observing Arthur getting stitches: "Arthur shot me little tear-whelmed glances as it took place, and I looked on, firm and encouraging, as a parent might over some necessary ordeal of its child" (35). Will's narration un-self-consciously reveals his racist and classist stereotypes by constructing his lovers as childlike and inferior to himself. In particular, Will dwells on linguistic differences between himself and Arthur. For example, Will describes their discussions as "a kind of a baby-talk" and notes how he "pressed [Arthur] to the edge of his articulacy" (39). In fact the passage below reveals how Arthur's alleged verbal and intellectual inferiority is a large part of why Will desires him:

Even when he spoke, in his basic, unimaginative way, I felt almost sick with desire and compassion for him. Indeed, the fact that he had not mastered speech, that he laboured towards saying the simplest things, that his vocal expressions were prompted only by the strength of his feelings, unlike the camp, exploitative, ironical control of my own speech, made me want him more. (74)

In contrast to the traditional romance which positions audiences to invest in the union between lovers, *The Swimming-Pool Library* uses Will's romances to illustrate the exploitative components of upper-class, white gay desire. Rather than soliciting our

support for this romance, scenes like these illustrate how a projection of the other as different from and inferior to oneself is intrinsic to white male fetishism of black men.

Will's infantilization of Arthur contains another component as well; it positions Will as parent and protector. Yet Will's desire to perceive himself in this way conflicts with the self-centered pursuit of sex and pleasure that structures his days. Despite resisting any intrusions into this freedom, he clearly wants to see himself as a savior:

I wanted to save Arthur. At least I think that's what I wanted to do to him. It was the strange conviction I had, that I could somehow make these boys' lives better, as by a kind of patronage—especially as it never worked out that way. (332)

The idea that Will uses his resources and inherited privilege for the good of those with less than him is very much a fantasy and the novel exposes how inaccurate this fantasy is. In his desire to "patronize" others, Will seems to ascribe to Charles' belief in philanthropy, yet the results between the two differ markedly. While Will fantasizes about protecting Arthur but does little to achieve it, Charles actually serves as patron to a number of men in the novel: he finds a job at a Boys' Club for one man and employs a number of ex-convicts as personal servants. Moreover, many of the young men who work at his club seem to have found jobs through him. Will's difference from Charles illustrates the disintegration of a Victorian ethic of service to others and its replacement with a practice of consumption.

Although Will imagines himself as protector and Arthur as his child-like lover, the novel paints another picture by chronicling their descent into a mutual "abasement" in which Will fetishizes Arthur's blackness and his youth:

I was eight years older than Arthur, and our affair had started as a crazy fling with all the beauty for me of his youngness and blackness. Now it became a murky business, a coupling in which we both exploited each other, my role as protector mined by the morbid emotion of protectiveness. I saw him becoming more and

more my slave and my toy, in a barely conscious abasement which excited me even as it pulled me down. (38)

This “barely conscious abasement” is what excites Will, and as he exploits Arthur he too is degraded. Although Will describes their exploitation of each other as mutual and the affair as a “murky business,” Hollinghurst leaves little ambiguity in his depiction of how Will views and treats Arthur. Will’s description of Arthur as his “slave” and “toy” reflects his prejudices and positions readers to condemn his behavior. In fact, throughout the novel Will appears shallow, self-centered, narcissistic, and, occasionally, cruel. Yet though Will is critiqued, Hollinghurst is not interested in condemning his desire outright. Instead, he historicizes Will’s fetishization of Arthur. Will’s hedonism, his class privilege, and his racist fantasies are all put in a political and economic context that is slowly revealed to readers as the web of secrets in the novel is unraveled. As we read Charles’ diary entries from the 1920s, we learn that British gay male culture has long fetishized black male bodies, and white gay men have frequently constructed their romantic relationships with black men as relationships between protector and infantilized lover. In this way, readers are taught to see the imperial legacy present in contemporary relationships.

As I noted earlier, the novel is structured as a bildungsroman; however, the question of whether or not Will actually learns anything from his experiences is not fully answered by the text. Although he discovers his own family’s complicity in the oppression of others and develops a new understanding of his own vulnerability as a gay man, the novel ends as it began with Will cruising a man he has just met: “And going into the showers I saw a suntanned young lad in pale blue trunks I rather liked the look of” (336). Will thus obsessively repeats his behavior, possibly both the cruising and the

exploitation that often accompanies it. That Will does not change even as he gains some awareness illustrates Hollinghurst's lack of interest in posing an alternate dynamic between gay men; instead he seeks to document the legacies of Empire still alive in gay relationships in postcolonial London. There is no healing or working through in the novel, no place on the other side of imperial dynamics that characters reach. The text therefore enacts melancholy and not mourning.<sup>41</sup>

**“The wildest apostasy...the greatest revelation”: Brotherhood Between the Wars**

I formed the impression that I was in the presence of a superior kind of person. Now this was a very strange impression to form. Here at Dekatil, surrounded by the radiant darkness of the Nuba, with not another white man for hundreds of miles, I am continuing to act on it. Does anyone else feel it, or understand? Did anyone then, at Winchester? It was the wildest apostasy. It was the greatest revelation. It affected one's view of everything. (132-33)

At one point in the novel, Will's best friend James remarks on the similarities between Charles and Will because of their mutual desire for black men: “And you're very keen on the grace, nobility, and so forth of Negroes” (101). Will, however, distinguishes himself from Charles' “trying kind of nature-worship thing about blacks” (208).

Although Will appreciates the beauty of black men, he claims, “I don't go writing about it in this secret, religious kind of way” (208). While Charles, Will, and even the novel's moral center, James (who collects magazines such as *Black Rod*), fetishize black male bodies, it is Charles' idealization of black men that most separates him from Will. Unlike Will, Charles believes in the “brotherhood” that the Corry's doorway depicts; his romantic, idealistic beliefs stand in direct contrast to Will's selfish and shallow desires. In this way, Hollinghurst illustrates how similar patterns of gay male desire and exploitation

persist, alongside the deterioration of the idealism and ethic of service present in the early part of the twentieth century. For Charles, black men are “a superior kind of person,” and he allows this belief to shape his life.<sup>42</sup> More than a sexual desire, his feelings for black men become a kind of creed that, as he puts it, “affected one’s view of everything.” After hundreds of pages of Will’s callous and exploitative attitude, Charles’ idealism is compelling even if it is based on stereotyping and fetishizing.

Charles’ diary entries are filled with examples of the effect attractive young black men have on him. For example, he records his feelings at the sight of a young black boy’s smile on his first day in Africa, September 12, 1923:

I was inordinately, unaccountably moved by this-- except that I knew it for what it was, a profound call of my nature, answered first at school by Webster, muffled, followed obscurely but inexorably since. Was it merely lust? Was it only baffled desire? I knew again, as I had known when a child myself, confronting a man for the first time, that paradox of admiration, of loss of self, of dedication...call it what you will. (211-12)

The feelings provoked by the young boy in Africa remind Charles of his first realization of what becomes a lifelong desire for black men, a realization which occurs upon meeting a boy named Webster at school. As the above quotation reveals, Charles sees this desire as “a profound call of my nature,” a spiritual and not just sexual awakening which leads him to spend a large portion of his life as a District Commissioner in the Sudan. As he depicts Charles’ colonial service, Hollinghurst suggests that a core motivation for some men in the service of Empire was the opportunity for sex with other men and that homosexuality outfitted them as ideal colonial servants. In contrast to current fears about gays as security risks, Charles tells Will that gay men are “prone to an immense idealism and dedication” and are therefore well-suited to colonial service (282). Although Charles doesn’t become sexually involved with African men in the colonies his time there,

according to the diary entries, is suffused with longing. Charles' relationship with Taha al-Azhari, in particular, is central to his narration of his life, and therefore to the history of twentieth-century gay British life the novel produces.

Charles' relationship with Taha, who begins working for him when he is stationed in the Sudan and stays in his employment for twenty-eight years, is the most significant of his life. Although it is not a sexual relationship or a conventional romance, Taha's importance to Charles cannot be emphasized enough; Charles even describes it as "like a marriage." The novel never makes explicit why their relationship is not sexual although it implies that Taha is uninterested in sex with Charles and, perhaps, that Charles would not taint his idealized relationship with the base, physical act of sex. After Taha visits Charles while he is in prison, Charles writes: "That night I lay long awake, caught up again, with a vividness of recall, in the life we had spent together. Despite a thousand differences it was like a marriage, a great, chaste bond of love and tact" (301). Later, a warden in prison callously informs Charles of Taha's murder by a racist gang:

'I have some' — he seemed to hesitate to choose and then reject an adjective — 'news for you, Nantwich. You have a servant, a houseboy. What is his name?'

'I have a companion. He is called Taha al-Azhari.' ...

'He's dead.' (301)

Charles' re-framing of their relationship to one another as "companions" and his refusal to allow the warden to define them as solely employer and servant, illustrates his view of their bond. Even more revealing, Charles ends the passage about Taha's death, "And so the light of my life went out" (303). In this moment, the union between Charles and Taha is narrated as a tragic romance in which the two men are separated by a brutal, racist murder. Charles and Taha become the traditional star-crossed lovers of the national

romance as Charles unironically employs the conventions of the tragic romance. While the novel itself criticizes and revises the national romance, Charles very much believes in the fantasy of union it represents. And, I would argue, readers are, at least at first, moved by the tragedy of the relationship and the tenderness with which Charles describes his feelings for Taha.<sup>43</sup>

The novel leaves no doubt that the relationship between Charles and Taha is meant to be read allegorically, at least according to Charles for whom this relationship becomes an embodiment of the British Empire. For instance, after treating the sixteen-year-old Taha who has been bitten by a scorpion,<sup>44</sup> Charles writes:

I felt all my vague, ideal emotions about Africa & my wandering, autocratic life here take substance before my bleary eyes . . . . At once I saw he was my responsibility made flesh: he was all the offspring I will never have, all my futurity. (246)

In the above scene, as in much of Charles' writing, Taha is portrayed as beautiful, innocent, and childlike, and Empire is constructed as a loving, asexual union between two men with the more powerful colonizer taking care of the colonized subject. The portrayal of colonial subjects as children who need to be protected, disciplined, and/or educated is a frequent rhetorical strategy of Empire; what is original here is Charles' reinterpretation of this racist structure in the service of his idealistic vision of himself as a gay white man loving and protecting the innocent African he desires. In addition, Charles' infantilization of Taha mirrors Will's depiction of Arthur, linking Will's desires to this earlier colonial moment. Most intriguingly, the passage reveals how, according to Charles, gay men's chance for "futurity" is through their relationship with colonized subjects rather than biological offspring. (I will return to this idea of gay men and futurity at the conclusion of this chapter.) Yet despite Charles and Taha's relationship's basis in the racist ideology of



Empire, it is also depicted as long-lasting, faithful, and loving, and, as such, it stands in direct contrast to Will's more exploitative relationships.

The novel alludes to the idea that these romantic and sexual relationships across racial and class boundaries had the potential to lead to the formation of communities. The thought that class reconciliation, and to a lesser extent racial unity, could be brought about through gay romantic relationships was not just confined to literature. Alan Sinfield and Jeffrey Weeks have each pointed out how some gay male communities in the 1950s saw themselves providing a blueprint for class reconciliation as they broke through class barriers in their romantic relationships and friendships.<sup>45</sup> For instance, as J.A. Symonds wrote to Edward Carpenter: "The blending of Social Strata in masculine love seems to me one of its most pronounced, and socially hopeful features. Where it appears, it abolishes class distinctions, and opens by a single operation the cataract-blinded life to their futilities."<sup>46</sup> Indeed, this feature of gay culture was one of the reasons that it was seen as such a threat to the social order: it failed to obey the laws of class stratification.<sup>47</sup> In a fascinating study that chronicles how homosexual desire influenced many imperialists' careers and political choices, Robert Aldrich acknowledges that while many of these men supported the Empire they worked for, others were critical of it despite their participation. He suggests that those who objected to aspects of the imperial project may have done so, in part, because of allegiances they had formed across racial and class boundaries:

Lack of deep concern for colonised people by many figures, and the unabashed sabre rattling and flag waving of a few, make more poignant the courage of those who raised voices against imperialism, and the extreme effort of ones who attempted to breach barriers of race and class. Examples of long-standing friendships—Carpenter and Arunachalam, Forster and Masood—and cases of men, like Senac, who cast their lot with anti-imperialists, are powerful reminders

that homosexual proclivities led to opposition to colonialism as well as promotion of expansion, to mutually beneficial relationships as well as exploitation.<sup>48</sup>

As Aldrich admits, however, the majority of these men were involved in the imperial enterprise, a system that benefited them in many ways, including by providing them access to colonized men and “promot[ing] hierarchical relationships propitious to sexual commerce.”<sup>49</sup> Weeks also documents this paradox where “sexual colonialism” existed alongside the dream of class reconciliation.<sup>50</sup>

Hollinghurst’s treatment of the queer national romance illustrates both the utopic ideal of reconciliation Symonds praises and the sexual colonialism Aldrich and Weeks describe. For example, although some of the erotic investments Charles and other privileged men of his generation engage in do create communal bonds, the community they create is made up primarily of upper-class white men who occasionally exchange working-class and black lovers. The working-class and black characters are not portrayed as full characters or participants in the community. Even more significantly, only once do we hear the perspective of any of the characters from formerly colonized nations directly. Everything we learn about them and their lives, thoughts, or desires we hear from Will’s narration or Charles’ diary entries. The narrative is interested in Arthur and Taha, for example, only by virtue of what they inspire in the men who want them. Consequently, this is not a novel about what it was like to be a black gay man in the 1980s or a colonial subject in the 1930s. Instead, the novel interrogates the desires of gay white upper-class men and examines how they have helped to shape Britain’s history.

Even though the utopic ideal of class and racial reconciliation is undermined, Charles still believes in the fantasy of white protector and innocent African subject. Yet the novel undercuts the idea that this “protection” is motivated solely by love and

philanthropy. Over the course of the novel, information is revealed that calls Charles' motives into question. We learn that the men and boys he seems to be helping in a selfless way often repay him by participating in group sex that Charles and a photographer-friend film and distribute. The novel does not condemn pornography or sexual exchanges, but it does raise questions about the potential coerciveness of this particular arrangement and of sexual commerce in general. Even more shocking, however, is the revelation that Abdul, a chef from the club who acts in Charles' porn films, is actually his beloved Taha's son. Although Charles' relation to Abdul does not shed new light on his feelings towards Taha, the selfless love that Charles has for Taha may be tainted in readers' minds by this prurient side of his philanthropy. Yet the novel depicts Charles as completely unaware of the disintegration of the ideal of the brotherhood between "men of all nations" that his behavior indicates, a disintegration that readers are made very aware of.

In fact, Charles ascribes a purity to all same-sex unions that he contrasts explicitly with heterosexual marriage. While Charles portrays male unions as romantic and idealized and his relationship with Taha as a "great chaste bond of love and tact," he views heterosexual marriage as a depressing event that destroys an innocent, earlier state. Although Taha continues to work for him, Charles views Taha's eventual marriage as an ending, a death:

It is true that the announcement of any marriage, however dear to me the couple & however perfectly suited to each other, invariably fills me with the blackest gloom; it may lift after a day or two, though not before an ending sense has been instilled, not of the beginning of something new, but of the irrevocable ending of something innocent & old. But when the innocence is that of my own Taha . . . I felt it almost as if he had died—or worse, been magically translated into some other element. It was as if I saw him through field-glasses dancing & singing in a

place so far away that when he opened his mouth, when his lips moved, no sound disturbed the silence. (265)

According to Charles, male unions are “something innocent & old,” and heterosexual marriage is a “magical translation into some other element.” Along these same lines, the colony, public school, university, and even prison are depicted with varying degrees of nostalgia as innocent, all-male worlds. Charles, for instance, remembers childhood fondly, particularly his time at public school, a nostalgia that is echoed by Will, and represents it as a time of innocence. Countering mainstream discourses about homosexuality, such as those espoused by supporters of Section 28, this “innocent” time is marked by happy recollections of sodomy. Yet as the novel debunks the queer national romance, it also questions this nostalgia and amends these fond memories with a recounting of Charles’ rape by an older boy while at school.

Marriages differ from same-sex romances in *The Swimming-Pool Library* in another way as well: none of the few heterosexual unions the novel depicts cross class or racial barriers. The few marriages that do exist in the world of the novel—Will’s parents, his sister and her husband Gavin, and Taha and Niri—are not unions across difference but instead relationships based on sameness. Charles figures heterosexuality as conformity and so, it seems, does the novel; marriage exists to increase or sustain wealth and connections, while homosocial relations may be based on a purer love, “something innocent & old.” Heterosexuality and marriage are represented as taking people away from a pre-lapsarian homosexual state of innocence and grace. Although this fantasy is appealing as a counter to homophobic discourse, it is also specifically misogynist, as Charles’ reflections in his diary about a friend getting married reveal: “I cdn’t [sic] avoid remembering Tim and his angelic beauty at 15. It was not nice to think of female

fingernails doodling over his smooth man's body" (175). Not just a critique of the institution of marriage, Charles' view illustrates his misogynist belief that women ruin male homosocial worlds, a belief most famously exemplified in *A Passage to India*.<sup>51</sup> Hollinghurst holds this fantasy of male union up for critique by exposing its attendant misogyny; however, again, he is not interested in positing an alternate vision—one where women might play a different role—just as he is not interested in imagining gay relationships free from imperial dynamics. This melancholic representation of the past does not imagine a new and different future.

In fact, very few women appear in the novel, and the few who do seem to exist primarily to separate men from each other.<sup>52</sup> For instance, although we never actually meet her, Will's sister Philippa is portrayed as an uptight and occasionally hysterical mother who dresses her children in inappropriate Edwardian outfits and whisks her son Rupert out of Will's house almost as soon as he arrives. Similarly, Niri never appears in the narrative and functions only as the woman who "steals" Taha from Charles. The only other women even mentioned in the text are Poppy, who lingers in the background of Charles' photographs but who is so insignificant that her relationship to Charles never becomes clear, and two women who work at a hotel Will visits who speak one line of dialogue each. Even the photographs of Charles' time in Africa reveal an absence of women:

Most of them, though, clearly—or, in many cases fuzzily—depicted life in the field, and were full of reticent authenticity. Typically, they showed groups of natives, largely or wholly naked, standing around under dead-looking trees, gazing at flocks of goats or herds of cattle. . . . In only one photo did a woman appear prominently. (111)

This absence can be explained in part by an attitude Charles and Will seem to share. In a conversation with Charles, Will claims, “[T]he sense I have [is] that men don’t really want women around much. I think most men are happiest in a male world, with gangs of best friends and all that” (283). The novel documents these homosocial worlds and exposes their underlying homoeroticism.<sup>53</sup> As it reveals the homoeroticism of the colonial milieu, the novel recreates the literary convention of interracial male bonding present in so much canonical literature—for instance in Joseph Conrad’s and Herman Melville’s works—while making readers aware that women are virtually absent in this tradition. In this way, the novel highlights one of the queer national romance’s most problematic conventions and at the same time participates in the very tradition it criticizes.

The novel’s treatment of race is similarly ambivalent. Critical opinion varies as to whether *The Swimming-Pool Library* critiques the racist desires and structures it depicts or, perhaps inadvertently, recreates them. Hollinghurst has stated that he intended the novel to comment on the connections between racist and homophobic violence, a connection the novel makes most explicitly in the parallel attacks by fascists on Will and Taha.<sup>54</sup> The novel places homophobic and racist incidents side by side and effectively draws out the connections between them: the ways similar groups often persecute both gays and blacks, as well as how privileged gay men often recreate prejudices in their own communities. Yet as the novel examines gay white male desire for black men, many critics think it recreates the prejudice and fetishizing it depicts. For instance, Brenda Cooper sees the novel as “vulnerable to collusion with oppression instead of providing a critique of it,” and asks, “do the novel and its devices...partake of aspects of the colonial violence and domination that are simultaneously being interrogated and exposed?”<sup>55</sup> Alan

Sinfield argues that the novel and its depiction of stereotypes are open to two possible readings:

*The Swimming-Pool Library* is certainly available to a reading that sees it as setting up objectified stereotypes so that readers will place them historically and reject them as an infringement of humanity. . . . However, at the same time, an alternative reading is possible. Portions of *The Swimming-Pool Library* may revitalise stereotypical motifs; they may give them new plausibility; they may make them available, in fact to a pornographic reading.<sup>56</sup>

Christopher Lane, on the other hand, praises the novel, persuasively arguing that it exposes racism and yet does not naïvely believe that desires can be simply transformed:

The subtlety and strength of Hollinghurst's novel lies in its ability to implicate every character in this invidious economy of racism without banalizing the complexity (and often the simplicity) of their sexual encounters or drawing pious conclusions about the need to transform or eradicate their thoughts.<sup>57</sup>

As these critiques illustrate, it is the novel's inability to find a way out of the imperial dynamics it depicts which leads some critics to question its politics. Because it engages melancholically with the past, the novel illustrates the prevalence of colonial legacies; yet this is exactly what is fascinating and, indeed, most politically productive about the text. There is no way to move past dynamics that we do not acknowledge. *The Swimming-Pool Library* asserts that although the Empire is gone, its legacy is still with us. Shifting away from full-fledged—albeit thwarted—romances in the novel, I turn now to two brief sexual encounters which clarify Hollinghurst's revision of the queer national romance.

### **“I can whip you for what you did to my country in the war”: the Failures of Allegory**

Hollinghurst's choice to incorporate a scene referencing the Falklands/Malvinas War is fitting. The war was, in many ways, the last gasp of the British Empire and it makes sense that a text concerned with the legacies of imperialism would take up this

contested and significant moment in British national history. Conservatives see the Falklands/Malvinas War as a decisive victory and a moment of national rejuvenation. Many others, however, consider it a huge fiasco: “a moment of failed leadership and incompetence... [a] lack of foresight, indecisiveness and recklessness [which] cost 259 British and 650 Argentinean lives.”<sup>58</sup> The conflict over the Falklands/Malvinas—a British territory off the coast of Argentina that is home to approximately 1,800 British citizens—arose in 1982 when the islands were invaded by Argentina. The citizens of the Falklands/Malvinas would have accepted a decision to lease back the islands to Argentina and proposals to this effect were first taken up by Thatcher’s cabinet in 1979. However, the cabinet failed to act on them and the crisis came to a head when Argentina finally invaded the islands as it had repeatedly threatened to do. Virtually the entire British government favored going to war in response to the invasion, in spite of efforts by Peru and other nations to negotiate a peaceful resolution. Over nine hundred people died in the seventy-two day war, which ended with the British retaining possession of the islands. Despite these deaths and many historians’ assertions that the war could have been avoided, Thatcher’s approval ratings shot up to 44 percent after the conflict.

To understand what was quite a large surge in approval, we must contextualize the war in British postcolonial history, in particular in light of the Suez crisis. Although the British had been losing their Empire gradually for some time, the Suez crisis, in effect, symbolized the end of Empire. After Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956, and jeopardized Britain’s trade route to India, Britain and France attacked Egypt. Before they could complete their objective of occupying the canal, diplomatic pressure from the United Nations and internal pressures at home forced a withdrawal. Subsequently, the



United States took on a greater role in the region and Britain and France were obliged to recognize their weakening international influence. This humiliation was followed within a year by independence in Ghana and, over the next ten years, by the decolonization of the other African colonies Britain held. It is in this historical context that Britain entered into the Falklands/Malvinas War.

Recent colonial losses shaped the British government's actions in the Falklands crisis and also determined the interpretation of those actions by the British public. As Smith argues,

It was a post-colonial Britain which constructed the myth of the Falklands/Malvinas War—what might have struck another nation as ridiculous sabre-rattling from another age, an absolute bungling of diplomatic relations and an unacceptable loss of life, became an inspiring national victory.<sup>59</sup>

Nigel Lawson, then Energy Secretary, illustrates this view of the war as an “inspiring national victory” when he claimed that “the Falklands experience...finally laid the ghost of the Suez. It also showed the world—and more importantly ourselves—that Britain still possessed a patriotism and a moral fibre that many thought had gone forever.”<sup>60</sup> Margaret Thatcher also perpetuated this interpretation of the conflict in her speeches. For example, in October 1982 she stated:

The spectacle of bold, young Britons, fighting for great principles and a just cause, lifted the nation. Doubts and hesitations were replaced by confidence and pride that our younger generation too could write a glorious page of our history.<sup>61</sup>

Her words belie the anxieties of a former Empire plagued by “doubts and hesitations,” a nation who saw its past as “glorious” in a way its present could not compare to. Only in this context could the war be seen as a national victory:

Thatcher only emerged from the Falklands/Malvinas War as a triumphant warrior rather than an incompetent and belligerent diplomat because she was able to call upon a particularly jingoistic patriotic fervour which was, to a great extent,

animated and defined in terms of the struggle against the not-Western colonial 'other.' Interpreted within this post-colonial framework, the South Atlantic crisis became an opportunity for the Thatcherites to re-write the story of decolonization and to liberate a revitalized guilt-free nationalism.<sup>62</sup>

The Falklands thus became a chance for conservatives to "rewrite" decolonization and reassert an image of England as "glorious" and in the process recast ex-colonial subjects as "other." Unsurprisingly, *The Swimming-Pool Library* addresses this national emergency through one of Will's sexual encounters. As it allegorizes the war through a failed sexual encounter between Will and an Argentinean man who demands sexual reparations from Will for Britain's military aggression, the novel challenges conservative discourse by re-imagining the Falklands War as something for which Argentina might rightly expect compensation.

In one of the funnier scenes in the novel, Will encounters Gabriel, an attractive Argentine, at a hotel in London. The two go back to Gabriel's room where he proceeds to pull out an amazing array of gay pornography and sexual paraphernalia he has purchased to take back home. Wondering where the man lives that he feels the need to stockpile this vast collection, Will asks Gabriel where he is from:

'Argentina,' he said with a neutrality of tone which showed that this news was likely to have some effect. It made me want to apologize to him; at the same time I could have castigated him for buying up all this trash. Surely if any British self-esteem could have been thought to have survived the recent war it must have something to do with our... cultural values? The top magazine in the suitcase was a tawdry old thing I could remember from schooldays called *Latin Lovers*. 'But what about the war?' I said dismally, seeing a TV news map of the Southern Atlantic and imagining too the customs-check at Buenos Aires. 'That's all right,' he said, putting his arms around my neck. 'You can suck my big cock.' (320)

Will eventually leaves after an unsatisfying sexual encounter as Gabriel offers to whip him "for what you did to my country in the war," saying, "I think that might be taking

the whole sex and politics metaphor a bit too seriously old chap...I could see the whole thing deteriorating into a scene from some poker-faced left-wing European film” (322). Whereas other unions I have discussed in this chapter represent two different interests coming together to form one national or imperial union, here the novel illustrates two separate nations recently at war and an attempt to act out their conflict on a sexual stage. However, as Will’s comments demonstrate, sexual encounters are not able to represent reconciliation or provide reparations between these two nations and Will mocks Gabriel for his suggestion. This scene reminds readers that the tendency to see sexual unions as national allegories is a prominent enough trope to be parodied and illustrates Hollinghurst’s desire to critique its heavy-handed use. Moreover, it distinguishes his nuanced and self-conscious use of the genre of the national romance from other more contrived uses of it such as Gabriel’s.

Yet although this scene announces itself as a parody, it should not be dismissed too quickly. The scene’s placement in the novel gives us a clue as to its meaning and significance; it follows Will’s discovery of his grandfather’s role in the persecution of gay men in the 1950s and precedes his realization that his boyfriend Phil is cheating on him. The myths he has believed in—his grandfather as a benevolent patriarch, his boyfriend as “the only true, pure, simple thing” in his life (317), and the “tendernesses of an England long past”—are being shattered one by one. And, with this scene, his vision of himself as the powerful, subversive seducer of younger men is also contradicted. I read this scene as an example of one more myth shattered—for Will and for readers: the innocent use of the national romance as a metaphor for “men of all nations uniting.” The convention is shown to be aesthetically-impooverished, politically-loaded, and open to

manipulation; it is something that could wind up in some “poker-faced left-wing European film.” What is most interesting about it is that Gabriel uses the conventions of the national romance as a way of making a postcolonial critique against the war and, more generally, British imperialism by demanding Will service him “for what you did to my country in the war.” The novel is narrated from the perspective of upper-class British gay men and few other voices intrude. Yet in this scene Gabriel speaks, and as he does so, he voices a postcolonial critique that takes this literary form often used to justify colonialism and revises it to work against imperialism. While Britain’s leaders asserted that the war was a victory to be celebrated, *The Swimming-Pool Library* re-imagines it as an event which necessitates compensation.

While virtually all of the romances in the text eventually fail—couples are separated by tragedies or betrayals, romances are revealed as shallow and baseless—Will’s sexual encounters are usually depicted in a more flattering light. So why is this scene so different? Why does Will leave unsatisfied without having performed the requested service? Will says he walks out because of Gabriel’s array of sexual paraphernalia and his unwillingness to refrain from contrived verbal commentary as they have sex. On its surface, then, the scene critiques the commodification of sexual cultures; Will does not find Gabriel’s leather mask, his cock ring, and his repetitive recitation of lines from American porn appealing, and the novel portrays this behavior as ridiculous rather than sexy.<sup>63</sup> Yet there seems to be something else motivating Will’s diminishing attraction to Gabriel as well: the reversal of the power dynamic Will is accustomed to. Throughout the novel, Will dates younger, less-educated men and he often holds them in thrall. Gabriel, however, asserts his control from the outset; he pays for their drinks in the

hotel lobby, invites Will back to his room, and orchestrates their entire encounter. Although it is Gabriel's suitcase of porn and his leather mask that Will voices an objection to, the reversal of the power dynamic might also be to blame. In fact, the final straw for Will is a "gigantic pink dildo slippery with Crisco" that Gabriel is about to use on him: a literal manifestation of "the Empire fucks back."<sup>64</sup> This scene voices a postcolonial critique by reversing traditional power dynamics between the "colonized" and "colonizer" and asserts that victims of colonial military aggression may deserve compensation. Although Will suddenly feels the need to apologize when he learns where Gabriel is from, he refuses to "service" Gabriel. Instead, the scene results in a failed union and the demolition of one more of Will's cherished beliefs.

Yet while Gabriel and Will cannot negotiate the Falklands/Malvinas war via sex, a conflict arising during World War II is narrated through a more successful national romance of sorts staged as a sexual encounter between Charles and Roy, an African American soldier. Again Hollinghurst places Charles' experiences alongside Will's to illustrate both historical continuities and differences; however, rather than uniting enemies, this scene brings together allies in the war. The scene begins with Charles recalling a conversation with a friend (and member of Parliament) described only as Driberg,<sup>65</sup> in which they discuss the predicament of black servicemen stationed in London during the war.

We lamented the still frequent attacks & insults meted out to coloured servicemen, by the English though mainly of course by the Yanks. It seems all Driberg's attempts to counter the foul American laws, in Parliament and & out, have been unsuccessful. Never mind, he said, he tried to make it up to them personally. (262)

Charles makes no comment on Driberg's sexual innuendo, but instead follows this chronicle with a story of his own encounter with a black serviceman. The comments by Driberg present the idea of sex as a sort of personal reparation for the larger, collective trauma inflicted by racial prejudice and position us to read Charles' story through that lens.

Charles picks up Roy on the street outside the movies and takes him for a swim at the Corry (again highlighting the "men of all nations uniting" theme the architecture establishes). After they swim together, Charles notes how Roy is self-conscious of showering with whites: "He was like the other American negro servicemen I've seen in the Corry, used to segregation & despite their often transcendent beauty and presence somehow cowed or fearful of rejection" (263). Charles perceives Roy as a victim of prejudice, as black servicemen often were during the war despite their large presence in the US army. He then goes on to narrate their sexual encounter back at his house graphically, describing it as "absolute bliss" and making clear that part of the pleasure of the event is that it is not a long-term romance but a one-time encounter:

Any repetition wd lack the spontaneity & beauty of yesterday, & I wd rather remember it as one of those rare & wonderful days when two strangers come together in deliberate ignorance of each other for their mutual pleasure. (264)

Strangers, it seems, can briefly unite for their "mutual pleasure" and their union can be motivated in part by a desire to ameliorate collective traumas; however, the only evidence of this benevolent power comes from Charles. There is no appeasement for the victims of prejudice and nothing that tells us that Roy read this act in the same light as Charles.

What this scene reveals is *Charles'* belief in the power of the queer national

romance—not Roy’s, not Will’s, and not the novel’s. It is portrayed as an appealing fantasy but a fantasy nonetheless.

While Will rejects both the reversal of power Gabriel attempts and his heavy-handed, self-conscious articulation of the national metaphor, Charles envisions strangers uniting “in deliberate ignorance of each other for their mutual pleasure.” Readers are thus presented with two interpretations of the sexual encounter as metaphor for national union. In the end, the queer national romance seems a decidedly-old fashioned fantasy, one that cannot function effectively in the landscape of contemporary London, at least as *The Swimming-Pool Library* paints it. The novel illustrates that neither a romantic, idealized union or a sexual fantasy that includes saving the working classes can intervene effectively in the racist, neocolonialist climate of England in the 1980s, the text’s “present moments of danger.” Gay culture can, however, produce revisions and critiques of its own artistic and cultural strategies—such as the fantasy of “men of all nations” uniting that the queer national romance promises—and *The Swimming-Pool Library* does just this as it examines imperial dynamics in the past and the present.

### **“We must *make something out of everything we do*”: Gay Men, Creativity, and the Future**

I would like to end this chapter by returning to the question I raised earlier about what *The Swimming-Pool Library* argues about melancholy, futurity, and gay male culture. If the national romance traditionally aims to produce representations of ideal future citizens—the children of the united lovers—and, at the same time, these texts seek to mold a similar ideal citizen out of their readers, then what exactly is Hollinghurst saying revisions of the queer national romance can produce? *The Swimming-Pool*

*Library*'s failed romances are not meant to produce future citizens. We are not asked to invest in any romances that embody postcolonial England or represent a healing of any of the crises the text addresses whether it is colonization, decolonization, or the Falklands/Malvinas war. Nor does the text endorse Charles' conception, one that was shared by many gay men of his time, of Taha/Africa as his "responsibility made flesh...all the offspring [he] will never have, all [his] futurity." The novel does, however, gesture towards answers to the question of what gay male culture can produce by sketching out a particular ethic of service and a vision of creativity represented by Charles and James respectively.

Charles' experiences in prison lead him to feel that he has a responsibility to other gay men, specifically to those who are less privileged than he is. Echoing Wilde's sentiment in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," Charles writes, "I would have to do something for others like myself, and for those more defenceless still" (304).<sup>66</sup> He has used his power, connections, and money to help others prior to his incarceration—finding young men jobs at his club, for instance—but he becomes even more aware of himself as someone with a responsibility towards those less fortunate after his stint in prison. It is as though he gains a newfound sense of solidarity with other gay men brought on by his confinement with them; they become defined as a group based on their persecution by others. He writes about this affinity in his diary,

Many of the distinctions of the outside world survived. . . . But at the same time, we were all criminals, a layer of social pretense had been removed. . . . There was between us a curiously sustaining mood of sympathy and understanding. (296)

The novel lauds Charles for his desire to help others despite the occasionally prurient origin of his impulses. It is Will's best friend James, however, who is most defined by a



life of benevolence. Not as central a character as Charles or Will, James is neither attractive nor privileged; nonetheless, he serves as the novel's moral center. As a doctor who treats the poor, James is the character most in touch with the economic and political realities of London. He sees illness, death, and the material effects of grinding poverty on a daily basis, and occasionally shares his view of all of this suffering with Will and subsequently, the reader. The only politically-engaged character in the novel, James is a committed leftist who reads the *Guardian* (as well as *Black Rod*) and goes to Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament demonstrations.

James models a politically-engaged stance and a contemporary version of Charles' ethic of service that the novel admires. However, I want to suggest that James' most important role is his articulation of an ideal of gay male creativity. James voices the novel's belief in creativity as an ideal when he explains an epiphany he had while listening to music by Haydn:

‘I thought what does this all mean? It means we must be as creative as possible—even if we can't actually have children, we must give ourselves completely to whatever we do, as I've always sort of thought, we must *make* something out of everything we do.’ (258)

Creativity and producing art becomes the answer to gay men's role in creating the future; that is their contribution. Instead of biologically reproducing, gay men can produce art. Their passion, their sexuality, and their love for one another can inspire beautiful works such as the Britten and Pears' opera of *Billy Budd* that the novel references. Yet the depiction of this ideal—the answer to the question of what gay men can and should produce with their lives—is merely gestured towards and for all his importance to the novel, James (and his contribution) gets little time “on-screen.”

Of course, this is characteristic of melancholy—there is no working through, just repetition and an insistence on the presence of the past—and it is this aspect of *The Swimming-Pool Library* that some critics and readers find so disturbing. Instead of a moving forward, a solving of the debilitating imperial dynamics that the novel illustrates, there is only an injunction to not forget the past. But this injunction enables us to see the way the past’s “ghosts and specters” are still alive in our “present moments of danger.” In Hollinghurst’s adept hands, the queer national romance becomes a vehicle which constructs a dynamic relationship between past historical moments and the present, while in the process developing a new relationship between Empire and the moment the text is set in. While some critics say mourn Empire and move on, Hollinghurst and the proponents of these new understandings of melancholy call for a less fixed relationship to the past, and search for a clearer understanding of the legacies of past moments and how they affect the present.

---

<sup>1</sup> David Eng and David Kazanjian, eds., *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2003), ix.

<sup>2</sup> *My Beautiful Laundrette*, DVD, directed by Stephen Frears (Orion Classics, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> *The Crying Game*, DVD, directed by Neil Jordan (Miramax, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

Subsequent references to this work will be given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>5</sup> The novel itself is quite seductive, but it is not the same seduction as that which occurs in a romance. Tracing other narrative arcs in the text—its mystery or bildungsroman for instance—would produce a very different analysis.

<sup>6</sup> E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1924).

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Weeks notes that in England in 1938 there were 134 arrests for sodomy and bestiality documented by the police. This rose to 1,043 in 1954, the year Charles is arrested in the novel. During that same period, the number of cases of “gross indecency” between men rose from 316 in 1938 to 2,322. Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual*

---

*Politics in Britain, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the Present* (London: Quartet Books, 1979), 158.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Philip Gambone, *Something Inside: Conversations with Gay Fiction Writers* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1999), 232.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Richard Canning, *Gay Fiction Speaks: Conversations with Gay Novelists* (New York: Columbia UP, 2000), 347.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Gambone, 234.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Bristow, *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing After 1885* (Buckingham: Open UP, 1995), 172.

<sup>12</sup> David Alderson, "Desire as Nostalgia: the Novels of Alan Hollinghurst," in *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture: Refiguring Contemporary Boundaries*, ed. David Alderson and Linda Anderson, 29-48 (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000), 35.

<sup>13</sup> Bristow, 178.

<sup>14</sup> Alan Sinfield, "Culture, Consensus, and Difference: Angus Wilson to Alan Hollinghurst," in *British Culture of the Postwar: An Introduction to Literature and Society 1945-1999*, eds. Alan Sinfield and Alistair Davies, 83-102 (New York: Routledge, 2000), 97.

<sup>15</sup> Hall quoted in Anna Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 132.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, 130.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>19</sup> *Chariots of Fire*, DVD, directed by Hugh Hudson (Warner Bros., 1981); *A Passage to India*, DVD, directed by David Lean (Columbia Pictures, 1984); *Jewel in the Crown*, DVD, directed by Christopher Morahan and Jim O'Brien (Granada Television, 1984).

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama Since 1980* (London: Oxford, 2003), 84.

<sup>21</sup> *Manor House*, DVD (Channel Four Television, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> I am being somewhat reductive here; the heritage film is a broad category and the films do different kinds of ideological work. Nevertheless, many do reify Empire despite their ostensible liberal message. See Higson for a thorough discussion of heritage films.

<sup>23</sup> See Higson; David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (London: Viking, 1997); and Salman Rushdie, "Outside the Whale," *Granta* 11 (1984): 125-38.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Lane, *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), 232-3.

<sup>25</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *General Psychological Theory*, 164 (New York: Collier, 1963).

<sup>26</sup> David Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 10, no. 4 (2000): 677-700.

<sup>27</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003); Jose Munoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999).

<sup>28</sup> Eng and Kazanjian, 3-4.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Benjamin quoted in Eng and Kazanjian, 6.

---

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Gambone, 244.

<sup>31</sup> Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> Smith, 146-150.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>34</sup> Both the dangerous queer and the black immigrant were figured as male in this rhetoric. Black women and lesbians were either ignored in these debates or stigmatized in other ways.

<sup>35</sup> Jackie Stacey, "Promoting Normality: Section 28 and the Regulation of Sexuality," in *Off Centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies*, ed. Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury, and Jackie Stacey, 284-304 (London: Unwin Hyman, 1991), 286.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>37</sup> Jarman makes clear in the published script that *Edward II* is a direct response to Section 28. Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (New York: Vintage, 1991); *Looking for Langston*, videocassette, directed by Isaac Julien (Third World Newsreel, 1989); *Edward II*, videocassette, directed by Derek Jarman (BBC, 1991).

<sup>38</sup> Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: MIT P, 2002), 140.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>40</sup> Cvetkovich, 241.

<sup>41</sup> *The Line of Beauty* presents an interesting comparison here. Also set in the 1980s, *The Line of Beauty* ends by looking forward in time rather than backwards. In the closing scene, the novel's protagonist Nick Guest envisions a future where he, like his two lovers before him, has died of AIDS. Unlike Will, Nick seems to have gained an understanding of the mechanisms of social power and his place in the world as a gay man. He has changed based on his experiences, yet he can see no place for himself in the world he imagines spreading out before him.

<sup>42</sup> This superiority does not extend to black women, who are never mentioned in his diary entries with the exception of Taha's wife, Niri, the woman Charles believes takes Taha away from him.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Aldrich's *Colonialism and Homosexuality* describes a number of historical examples of relationships that I believe may have formed the basis of Hollinghurst's portrayal of Charles and Taha. For instance, T.E. Lawrence dedicated his book *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* to Dahoum, a 14-year-old Arab boy who worked as his guide and cook. Before Dahoum's death in WWI, he lived with Lawrence and even accompanied him to England. Lawrence is reported to have called Dahoum the only person he had ever been in love with and claimed that he undertook his campaign in support of the Arab revolt for Dahoum's sake. Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (London: Routledge, 2003): 74-79.

<sup>44</sup> This incident also resembles one Aldrich describes: Cecil Rhodes nursed his secretary Jack Grimmer back to health after he was bitten by a scorpion in Rhodesia, 92-3.

<sup>45</sup> See Sinfield and Weeks.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Weeks, 41.

<sup>47</sup> The prosecution in the infamous Montagu-Wildeblood trial in 1954 acknowledged this aspect of homosexuality claiming, "It is a feature, is it not, that inverts or perverts seek their love associates in a different walk of life than their own?" Writing about the trial

---

later Wildeblood wrote, “The homosexual world knows no such boundaries — which is precisely why it is so much hated and feared by many of our political diehards. The real crime of Lord Montagu, for example, in the eyes of some ‘Society’ people, was that he became acquainted — on no matter what basis — with a man who (to quote the prosecution) was ‘infinitely his social inferior.’” Quoted in Weeks, 78.

<sup>48</sup> Aldrich, 9.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

<sup>50</sup> Weeks, 44.

<sup>51</sup> The colonial administrator Mr. Turton best articulates this belief when he admits to himself, “After all, it’s our women who make everything more difficult out here” (Forster, 207). Forster’s novel can be read as an implicit endorsement of this idea as the memsahibs separate English and Indian men with their rigid social boundaries; even well-meaning English women like Miss Queded cause great disruptions in friendships between men such as Aziz and Fielding.

<sup>52</sup> This is another point on which *The Line of Beauty* differs from *The Swimming-Pool Library* — it has a number of key female characters, many of whom are fairly well-developed.

<sup>53</sup> Aldrich’s description of the homosocial atmosphere in the colonies as well as the homoeroticism supports Charles’ portrayal: “The colonies provided many possibilities of homoeroticism, homosociality and homosexuality — a variety of perspectives and experiences by which men expressed attraction to other men (or male youths). Some European men found sexual partners, whether for casual encounters or longer-term relationships, among fellow Europeans or indigenous men. Others enjoyed the homosociality of predominantly male expeditions, military barracks, trading outposts and missionary stations. The gendered nature of expansion, in which men monopolized many imperial activities, and where manly virtues were championed, created situations congenial to intimate male bonding. The imbalance in the sex ratio between European men and women, and the limited range of sexual partners in some outposts, encouraged ‘situational’ homosexuality.” Aldrich, 3.

<sup>54</sup> In an interview Hollinghurst notes, “in 1954, the year I was born, there was the beginning of a gay pogrom and also the first fairly organized hostility and violence against coloured immigrants.” Quoted in Alderson, 31.

<sup>55</sup> Brenda Cooper, “Snapshots of Postcolonial Masculinities: Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Swimming-Pool Library* and Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 34, no. 1 (1999): 138.

<sup>56</sup> Sinfield, 97-8.

<sup>57</sup> Lane, 230.

<sup>58</sup> Smith, 10.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Smith, 11.

<sup>61</sup> Smith, 13.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>63</sup> The passage also questions the British “cultural values” and cultural imperialism that produce pornography such as *Latin Lovers* that sexualizes the formerly colonized and then sells these images back to them. *Latin Lovers* stands as one more example of the

---

racialized nature of homoeroticism and its link to imperialism—both military and cultural—in Charles’ colonial time period and Will’s neocolonial one. Moreover, by marking this text as something from Will’s school days the novel wittily aligns *Latin Lovers* with the British public school tradition, casting racialized homoerotic desire as something literally learned at school.

<sup>64</sup> As Sinfield also notes, there is one other moment when the colonial dynamic is reversed: when Abdul—Taha’s son—brutally fucks Will in the kitchen of the Club. In that scene, in contrast to the scene I describe above, Will does have sex, although he describes it in ambivalent terms. Sinfield, 97.

<sup>65</sup> Presumably this refers to Tom Driberg, a left-wing Labour MP who was convicted under gross indecency laws in the 1950s but was spared from any mention of this in the press with the help of powerful friends.

<sup>66</sup> Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis: The Ballad of Reading Gaol and Other Writings* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1999).

### 3. Impossible Unions: *Funny Boy* and the Queer National Romance that Isn't

In the previous chapter, I argued that Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* challenges nostalgic visions of Great Britain by undermining Will's "irresistible elegiac need for the tendernesses of an England long past."<sup>1</sup> The reader learns, along with Will, that the peaceful, idyllic England he longs for exists only in his fantasies and that the past is much more complicated than he imagined. These nostalgic fantasies, the novel reveals, have often been constructed through the image of interracial romantic unions between men, unions that serve as national or imperial allegories. But while Hollinghurst critiques the national romance and makes visible its nostalgia for an imperial past, he is not interested in replacing it with new narrative strategies for envisioning unity. Instead the novel repeatedly depicts the failure of reconciliation between England and its past colonial subjects in a melancholic vision of discord.

Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, in contrast, wrenches the queer national romance from its imperial context.<sup>2</sup> Rather than employing the genre to justify empire and mask the exploitation of one people by another, Selvadurai uses it to make a plea for an end to Sri Lanka's violence and to imagine a peaceful union between rival ethnic groups. Yet *Funny Boy*'s queer romance is set in the distant past, a moment the text longs for but recognizes is over. As a result, the novel constructs a union and then tears it apart, acknowledging that the queer national romance cannot contain the story it wants to tell. Ultimately a hopeful genre, the queer national romance imagines a future where the conflict it addresses is resolved. *Funny Boy*, like *The Swimming-Pool Library*, looks backwards. Consequently, although it makes use of the queer national romance, the novel eventually resorts to other genres to tell its story.

For over forty years Sri Lanka has been a nation divided by violence. Government-sanctioned ethnic riots, Tamil agitation for a separate state, and violence perpetrated by both guerilla groups and the military have plagued the country. Over sixty thousand Sri Lankans have died in the conflict in the past twenty years alone. Tamils, in particular, have suffered huge losses; in the past four decades, forty to fifty thousand Tamils have died in the civil war and another five to seven hundred thousand have fled Sri Lanka.<sup>3</sup> In this unstable political situation, images of ethnic unity stand in contrast to the persistent images of violence and ethnic hatred. *Funny Boy* creates a queer national romance between two boys that represents a healing of the factions in Sri Lanka's bloody civil war. As readers identify with Arjie, the novel's protagonist, they mourn his eventual exile from his homeland and his resulting loss of his first love. By engaging readers emotionally and making them invest in the romance it depicts, *Funny Boy* positions them to condemn the violence that eventually separates the lovers as well as the ethnic hatred and government inaction that lead to it. Thus *Funny Boy* exemplifies how, in certain contexts, the queer national romance can take a politically progressive stance rather than perpetuate imperial nostalgia. Yet *Funny Boy* makes an argument in favor of national unity while many Tamils campaign instead for a separate state. Perhaps as a result, the novel sets its image of union in the past, leaving open the question of whether it is possible, or even desirable, today. Rather than imagining reconciliation in the present or the future, the novel documents a moment when it was possible to at least desire a united Sri Lanka.

Six interrelated stories make up *Funny Boy*, a first-person account of Arjie's life as a young Tamil boy growing up in Sri Lanka in the 1970s and 1980s, a time of fierce



ethnic tension between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority. Although it is made up of individual stories, I argue that *Funny Boy* can be read as a novel because each story chronicles the same character's development and the final product forms a coherent narrative. As Arjie comes of age, he looks for ways to make sense of his life and a form in which he can narrate his experiences. The novel enacts his search as it shifts between genres and seeks conventions appropriate for telling Arjie's story. *Funny Boy* flirts with a number of genres including the bildungsroman, the colonial education story, and the coming of age novel. I focus, however, on what I argue are the three primary genres *Funny Boy* uses to tell Arjie's story: the queer national romance, the coming out story, and the exile narrative. I tease out the relationship between these genres, noting how they intersect, collide, and give way to one another.

Many see *Funny Boy* as a very conventionally-narrated text, but my analysis reveals that it is more complex than it appears. I read the novel as a meditation on genre and a challenge to generic purity. While other critics have noted how it subverts elements of a number of genres, they have failed to recognize what it accomplishes in its closing section where, I argue, it creates a new form it calls the riot journal. As a result, *Funny Boy* illustrates what happens when a story exceeds the boundaries of a genre. Thus I use this chapter to think through what kinds of stories the queer national romance cannot contain. In the following three paragraphs I explain how *Funny Boy* engages with each of these primary genres as I sketch out the novel's plot.

Romance is the first genre Arjie encounters. In the novel's opening story, "Pigs Can't Fly," Arjie tries to fit himself into the romance by constructing the fantasy game "bride-bride" with his female cousins, but he soon learns that the heteronormative

discourse cannot accommodate him. Arjie can consume romance—and indeed he reads them obsessively—but romance, it seems, cannot encompass his story. He continues, however, to see the world around him through the conventions of the romance until he witnesses his aunt’s relationship with a Sinhalese man being torn apart by communal violence and prejudice in the story “Radha Aunty.” In contrast to what his romance comics and the Sinhalese films he watches have led him to believe, Arjie learns that love does not conquer all. For all of its focus on recording the atrocities that took place during this time period, *Funny Boy* is also invested in creating alternative images to those of communal violence, images it constructs primarily through romances. All of the heterosexual relationships, however, are quickly torn apart.

Later in the novel, Arjie finds a genre that seems to be able to accommodate his life: the coming out story. “The Best School of All” adheres to the conventions of the coming out story as it continues the portrayal of Arjie’s gender non-conformity and depicts his desire for another boy and his struggle to understand and accept these desires. Different from most coming out stories, however, Arjie’s maturation as a sexual subject is intertwined with, and implicated in, his maturation as a political subject. It is through his love affair that Arjie is able to name the difference he has long felt but has been unable to understand, exhibiting another familiar feature of the coming out story. But the classmate Arjie falls in love with is Sinhalese and, consequently, the text takes on the conventions of another genre: the queer national romance. Their romance is played out against the backdrop of a power struggle at school, a struggle that mirrors the political situation in Sri Lanka at the time. For one shining moment, before it too is torn apart, Arjie and Shehan’s relationship stands in stark contrast to the images of violent discord

the novel depicts. But in the end the queer national romance cannot contain Arjie's story. His narrative exceeds the genre's boundaries and the novel ends with Arjie and Shehan separated.

*Funny Boy* incorporates elements of the queer national romance and the coming out story, but it is, at its heart, a tale of exile that struggles to come to terms with a traumatic moment in a nation's history that is also a traumatic moment in the author's life. In the final section, the communal violence which has hovered around the edges of Arjie's life takes center stage and disrupts all of the narrative conventions the novel has previously employed. "Riot Journal: An Epilogue" documents the communal violence that took place in 1983 when Tamil homes and businesses were attacked and thousands were killed by mobs. In the wake of the violence, Arjie's family (like Selvadurai's) decides to flee Sri Lanka for Canada. Consequently, exile becomes a genre imposed on the novel. This traumatic moment cannot be narrated in the genres Arjie has previously used to make sense of his life, so he responds by creating his own way of narrating the riots: part exile narrative, part epilogue, part diary. He calls the form a "Riot Journal." While the first five stories in the novel follow conventional structures and refer to familiar forms—even the genres that are subverted, such as the coming out story, are still recognizable—a new form is needed to narrate the trauma of the riots.

Other critics have recognized that *Funny Boy* uses and reworks the generic conventions of both the coming out story and the exile narrative. Gayatri Gopinath, for example, persuasively argues that the novel "disorganizes the conventional coming-out narrative that begins with an unliberated, 'prepolitical' homosexual practice and that culminates in a liberated, 'out,' politicized, 'modern,' 'gay' subjectivity."<sup>4</sup> That is, rather

than depicting Arjie moving towards a “modern” gay identity in the West, the book dwells on Arjie’s “funniness” which it firmly situates in Sri Lanka. In doing so, it challenges a teleology that equates the postcolonial state with tradition and the West with modernity. As Gopinath notes, *Funny Boy* also “complicates the axes of a conventional exilic novel with fixed points of origin and departure.”<sup>5</sup> Arjie narrates many exiles: exiles from the girl’s world, from childhood, from his family, and finally from Sri Lanka. There is no simple, uncomplicated home he longs to return to; instead the novel uses the nostalgia of exile and the poignancy of star-crossed lovers to create a longing in readers for a space that never was. In addition, Selvadurai reworks generic conventions as he deftly weaves the story of Arjie’s sexual awakening with the story of his growing awareness of himself as a political subject. Reviewers have commented on this imbrication of the political situation in Sri Lanka and Arjie’s sexual awakening. For instance, *Booklist* calls the novel “as personal as it is political;” *The New York Times* notes that “Arjie’s loss of innocence is as much a political process as a personal one,” and *Lambda Book Review* claims “the novel’s powerful impact is its successful presentation of the personal as a political issue.”<sup>6</sup>

While most critics and reviewers identify *Funny Boy* as a coming of age and coming out story and many discuss its use of the conventions of exile, few investigate its use of the romance. Yet the queer romance is the vehicle through which *Funny Boy* asserts the political nature of sexual identity and challenges its relegation to the realm of the personal. In fact, the romance is what the novel uses to make most of its political arguments. It is only by exploring the interplay between these genres—the coming out

story, the exile narrative, and the queer national romance—that we can truly understand *Funny Boy*'s intervention.

Shyam Selvadurai, himself a Sri Lankan exile, says he wrote *Funny Boy* for South Asians in general and for Sri Lankans in particular, but its publication history suggests that it has reached far beyond those communities. The novel was first published in 1994 in Canada where Selvadurai has lived since his family fled the violence in Sri Lanka in 1984. The Canadian edition was quickly followed by editions in the United Kingdom, India, Sri Lanka, the United States, France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden. Some critics have even called the book a “global bestseller.”<sup>7</sup> The Canadian edition of *Funny Boy* sold out before its publication date and the novel was unavailable for weeks in Toronto, Kuala Lumpur, and Colombo as publishers struggled to meet the unexpected demand.<sup>8</sup> In Sri Lanka the book was so popular and controversial that “everybody” read it, including the president of the country. In fact, it provoked a national debate about homosexuality and even caused Sri Lankans to consider repealing anti-sodomy laws.<sup>9</sup> *Funny Boy* was successful critically as well as commercially, winning a number of awards in various countries including the W.H. Smithbooks/Books in Canada Magazine’s first novel contest and the United States-based Lambda Literary Award for Gay Fiction. It was also nominated for the prestigious Canadian Giller Prize and was named an American Library Association Notable Book of the year.

I contend that the book has circulated so widely, in part, because of its effective blending of the conventions of the coming out story, the queer national romance, and the exile narrative, and because of its subsequent appeal to two large diasporic audiences: gays and lesbians and South Asians. Certainly, work by and about South Asians extends

far beyond the boundaries of South Asian communities just as interest in gay literature extends beyond gays and lesbians, and many readers interested in postcolonial literature and human rights struggles more generally have helped to popularize the novel. Nevertheless, South Asians and gays and lesbians are large albeit heterogeneous diasporas who actively consume literature by and about their communities. *Funny Boy* addresses them thematically, by centering its story on a Sri Lankan “funny” boy, and generically, by using narrative forms familiar to these communities. More than simply speaking to these diasporas, the novel attempts to constitute a new audience through its address. Selvadurai does this by forging a set of shared concerns among readers as he links experiences of homophobia, communal violence, and migration and exile. In this chapter, I explore how *Funny Boy* is able to create this appeal to these groups with their sometimes overlapping and at times divergent concerns. I argue that the novel can do this in part because of its choice of genres familiar to its audiences—in particular, the coming out story and the exile narrative. Yet Selvadurai challenges audiences by pushing the boundaries of these genres we think we know and reminding us what these genres leave out.

In what follows, I begin with an overview of Sri Lanka’s troubled history to make clear the political context *Funny Boy* attempts to intervene in. I then establish how *Funny Boy* rejects the heterosexual romance and creates the queer national romance as its primary allegory. Next I turn to the coming out story and illustrate how the novel pushes the boundaries of that genre but, in the end, conforms to it. Finally, I look at the novel’s closing section and argue that the story of communal violence *Funny Boy* wants to tell here exceeds the boundaries of the genres Selvadurai has been using thus far. In this

chapter, I trace Arjie's journey from consumer of texts to producer of his own story and argue that *Funny Boy* teaches us about the generic boundaries of the queer national romance.

### **Communal Conflict in Sri Lanka**

From the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth century, Ceylon was colonized by a succession of European nations: first Portugal, then the Netherlands, and finally England. The Dutch signed over possession of the coastal regions of Ceylon to the British in 1796, and in 1815 the British were able to annex the interior of the island as well. In the early part of British rule, Ceylon was under control of both the British crown and the East India Company; then in 1802 it became the first British Crown colony. Unlike the Portuguese and the Dutch who valued the island primarily for the spice trade, the British created plantations and brought over Tamil workers from South India to grow coffee, tea, and coconuts. The introduction of these workers substantially changed the ethnic make-up of the island. Moreover, new needs caused by the industrial revolution and the impact of global trade led to new types of political control and caused the British to make a number of significant changes to the political landscape.

Foremost among these changes was a system of communal representation introduced by the British in 1833 for all ethnic groups on the island. Although real power resided with the British governor, the Legislative Council had quotas for the various ethnic groups: Sinhalas, Burghers, Tamils, and Muslims. In theory, this communal representation helped to protect minority rights, but it also created particular kinds of racial categories where they had not existed before. Pre-colonial affiliations in Ceylon were based on regional affiliations more than on religious or linguistic alliances.

Moreover, while conflict during the colonial period did occur occasionally between religious groups, these differences did not always line up along linguistic or cultural boundaries.<sup>10</sup> It was only during the later colonial period that Tamils and Sinhalas began to see themselves as distinct ethnic groups, a view that was influenced by dominant racial theories prominent in Britain at the time and that affected British colonial policies.

In contrast to previous ways of conceiving of affiliation, ethnicity in present day Sri Lanka is determined on the basis of language and religion. The Sinhalese, who speak Sinhala and practice Buddhism, make up approximately 74 percent of the population of Sri Lanka.<sup>11</sup> The Tamils are the next largest group in the nation with approximately 18 percent of the population. Tamils are Hindu and have origins in India in the Tamil Nadu province, but despite these commonalities there exists a divide in the Tamil population. While many Tamils can trace their families in Sri Lanka back for generations, others immigrated from India more recently to work the tea plantations under British rule. The Tamils who have been in the country for a long time are generally well-educated and relatively affluent, while those brought over as migrants and their descendants often live in poverty. Muslims make up another 7 percent of the population while Burghers and Parsis together account for the remaining 1 percent. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the story of Sri Lanka's past has been told as a history of ethnic conflict, and each group uses history and myth to make their claim to the island. But according to historians Elizabeth Nissani and R.L. Sturges this understanding is a modern invention:

For Sinhalas, history justifies their claim to impose their rule over the whole island of Lanka. For Tamils, too, history is used to justify demands, in the past for a degree of autonomy for Tamil-dominated areas, and today for total separation from the



Sinhala-dominated parts of the country. Yet when we look at the shorter historical term at least, we find that during the colonial period violent clashes erupted between groups defining themselves in terms of religious affiliation but not between groups defining themselves as Sinhala and Tamil.<sup>12</sup> British colonial rule and the communal representation initiated by the British fostered the belief that Sinhalese and Tamils were racially distinct peoples with competing interests. The nation's history has been interpreted to support this claim.

The colonial legacy alone, however, cannot account for the current ethnic strife. Sri Lanka became independent in February of 1948 after a movement made up of Tamils and Sinhalese agitated for an end to colonial rule. After independence this tenuous unity disintegrated and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party soon came to power on a wave of Sinhalese nationalism. In response, the Tamils formed the United Front to “protect and preserve the rights of Tamils.” Over the next fifty years, this ethnic divide has only widened, erupting into a civil war that has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Sri Lankans. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a guerilla group fighting for an independent Tamil homeland, now rule much of the Jaffna Peninsula in the North and have been in a decades long, bloody battle with the government troops who control the rest of the island. The Tigers have killed members of rival Tamil guerilla groups, Tamils who question their policies, and ordinary citizens—both Tamil and Sinhalese—who have been caught in the crossfire or chosen as targets. The Sri Lankan government, aided by The Prevention of Terrorism Act, has responded by imprisoning, torturing, and even killing those suspected of a link to the Tigers. In addition to the violence perpetrated by the government and the Tigers, Sinhalese mobs angered by Tiger attacks in the North

have frequently turned against ordinary Tamil citizens in the South. In the last two decades alone, over sixty thousand people have lost their lives in this civil war.

*Funny Boy* directly addresses the ethnic conflict by setting its story in the events leading up to the 1983 riots. Riots targeting Tamils broke out in Sri Lanka in 1956, 1958, 1977, 1981, but the most serious of all of these began in July of 1983 after the Tamil Tigers killed thirteen soldiers in Jaffna. Rioting began in Colombo and spread, and the government made no effort to contain the violence for two days as Tamil houses were burned to the ground, Tamil-owned stores were looted, and Tamils were attacked, beaten, and murdered in the streets. President Jayewardene waited four days to make a public address about the violence sweeping his country, and when he did speak out—compelled by threats from the Indian government that they would intervene—he implied that the violence was an understandable reaction to the Tamil separatists. By the end of the week, one to two hundred thousand Tamils were homeless and somewhere between five hundred and a few thousand were dead.

Many believe the government not only failed to stop the riots in 1983, but also helped to incite them. Some claim that the government provided thugs with electoral lists showing where Tamils lived. Others contend that the armed forces and the police actually participated in the attacks on Tamils.<sup>13</sup> Rajiva Wijesinha argues, “both the prelude to the violence and the period during which it was permitted to continue unabated suggest that it was not simply a question of individuals taking the law into their own hands but rather what might almost be said to have amounted to a concerted policy.”<sup>14</sup> Jagath Senaratne describes the riots as “neither wholly spontaneous nor wholly-government instigated, but rather a complex amalgam of both.” He believes that initial rioters planned a small-scale

“lesson” to Tamils because of the insurrection in the North, but then a number of different actors got involved—including racists, criminals, and thugs—and the violence escalated.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of the differing opinions over the government’s role in inciting the riots, there is no doubt that its failure to intervene quickly resulted in much of the damage and loss of life.

The riots had a number of other effects as well. Perhaps most significant in terms of *Funny Boy*, many Tamils chose to emigrate to India, Canada, the United States, Australia, and Europe. Some research suggests that as many as seven hundred thousand Tamil refugees have fled Sri Lanka.<sup>16</sup> The riots also benefited the secessionist movement by increasing the number of recruits to groups like the Tigers and making the Tamil populace more sympathetic to their cause. In addition, more Tamils moved to Jaffna and other Tamil areas after the riots. On an international level, the riots generated sympathy for the Tamil cause and necessitated the Indian government’s intervention into the situation.<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately the most difficult question facing Sri Lanka today is whether these two groups with their violent and contentious recent history can live together peacefully. A.J. Wilson poses the question in this way: “can two such potent nationalisms coexist within a single sovereign state?” The answer, he believes, is “very much in the balance” and “depends on the leadership qualities displayed by both sides.”<sup>18</sup> In 2004 President Kumaratunga dissolved Parliament and suspended talks with the Tigers endangering the future of the peace process. The devastation wrought by the tsunami in December 2004, however, has changed dynamics on the island. International attention has been paid to the Tigers’ efficient governing of the areas they control and their quick action to aid tsunami

victims, and this notice may lead to support for Tamil independence. In addition, since the tsunami there have been instances of cooperation between the government and the rebels. The current moment is an opportunity that could lead to reconciliation, to a Tamil independent state, or to more fighting and competition for scant resources.

In a nation that has been unable to see itself as one entity where different ethnic groups share resources and live peacefully together, images of union have been scarce. Both Tamils and Sinhalese have constructed their histories as tales of a glorious past where their respective ethnic group thrived and either dominated the other population or lived independently from it. These racially-homogenous images of the nation—whether set in the past or the present—have helped to create the situation Sri Lanka faces today. As one historian puts it, “In the years of crisis there has been no overarching image of Sri Lankan national identity to hold Tamil sentiment back from the path to separatism; the only images available link the nation to one group, the Sinhalese people, and one religion, Buddhism.”<sup>19</sup> In this polarized context, *Funny Boy* and its same-sex Tamil/Sinhala union is nothing short of revolutionary.

### **“People Marry Their Own Kind”: Heterosexual Romance Undone**

Romance, specifically when it traverses ethnic barriers, is at the heart of Arjie’s education and at the center of the novel’s allegory of Sri Lanka’s political situation. *Funny Boy* depicts a number of heterosexual romances between members of rival ethnic groups, each of which addresses a particular crisis in the nation and educates Arjie about the political situation in Sri Lanka. In “Radha Aunty,” for instance, Arjie’s aunt Radha’s relationship with Anil, her Sinhalese suitor, comes apart as ethnic tensions between

Tamils and Sinhalese worsen and she is attacked in a riot. In another story, Arjie's mother's adulterous affair with a Burgher ends when he is killed attempting to expose the government's abuse of power against Tamil dissidents.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the novel depicts Arjie's own romantic relationship with Shehan, a relationship which forces him to intervene in the complicated power struggle going on at his school—which itself mirrors a national conflict going on at the time—and make a difficult choice about where his loyalties lie. It is this same-sex relationship that serves as the novel's main political allegory. As well as telling its story through a series of romances *Funny Boy* takes on the genre as one of its subjects. Arjie is a consumer of romances and we watch as he learns to distinguish between their conventions and the real life he sees around him.<sup>21</sup>

We see Radha's forbidden affair through Arjie's eyes. The young Arjie acts as his aunt's confidant and accomplice, often accompanying her to meetings with Anil, and this enables his in-depth view of their relationship. Throughout the novel Arjie is aligned with women who transgress social boundaries through their choice of lovers: first Radha and Anil, and then his own mother and her adulterous relationship with Daryl. By linking Arjie with these women, the text posits a link between female rebellion and interracial desire on the one hand and male homoerotic desire on the other. That all of this is seen through Arjie's point of view is significant; it is a child's perspective, a "funny" perspective, and a male perspective, but a perspective that is affiliated with both women and transgression. Creating this parallel between female transgression and male queerness lays the groundwork for Selvadurai's later argument about power and resistance. Arjie's struggles as a "funny" boy are not unique, the novel reveals, but instead part of a pattern in which less powerful social agents are repressed by the

powerful. A brief reading of Radha and Anil's relationship illustrates how it functions primarily as a lesson for Arjie and as a foil to the later romance between Arjie and Shehan.

The story "Radha Aunty" interweaves two interracial romances: one between the lovers in *The King and I* and the other involving Arjie's own aunt, Radha, and her Sinhalese suitor. The basic plot of the story follows Radha and Anil as they fall in love while performing in a local production of *The King and I*. Although her family wants her to marry Rajan, a wealthy Tamil engineer from a good family, Radha develops feelings for Anil in part, the story makes clear, because their love is forbidden. Both families object to the union because of ethnic prejudice. Radha's grandmother, in particular, is furious at the possibility of Radha marrying Anil because her father's murder, years earlier, by a Sinhalese mob has shaped her feelings. Despite familial opposition, the two lovers appear ready to run off together until a Sinhalese mob angered by a killing in the North attacks Radha's train. Badly injured, Radha escapes and subsequently breaks off the relationship with Anil. In the final scene of the story, she becomes engaged to Rajan, her family's choice, in a joyless ceremony that contradicts Arjie's original expectations. In what follows, I examine *Funny Boy's* allusions to *The King and I* as well as the references it makes to the love comics Arjie constantly reads and then turn to Radha and Anil's relationship. I argue that these romances do more than just illustrate the costs of ethnic prejudice; they also model an affectively-engaged mode of reading and teach us how to read the romances to come.

*The King and I* is one of many literary and dramatic texts that appear in *Funny Boy*. The incorporation of this play reveals the eclectic and decidedly feminine literary

tradition that the novel draws on. Although both *Funny Boy* and *The Swimming-Pool Library* comment frequently on their literary predecessors, Selvadurai's novel relies on a very different tradition than Hollinghurst's, as is evident in *Funny Boy's* allusions to popular culture; it references *Little Women* and Sinhalese love comics, not Forster and Firbank. These popular texts, all associated with female audiences, appear throughout *Funny Boy* and serve a number of functions. In the novel, reading and consuming popular culture are aligned with the feminine and contrasted with more masculine pursuits such as cricket. Arjie's affinity for particularly "feminine" genres such as love comics marks him as additionally queer. At the same time, the text's literary allusions exemplify the hybrid literary legacy Sri Lankan writers, in particular, and diasporic South Asian writers more generally have inherited. Arjie mentions British and American texts such as *Little Women*, the Hardy boys, and *The King and I* in one breath, and refers to Sinhalese comics or the myth of Vijaya, the father of the Sinhalese nation, in the next. This eclectic literary heritage illustrates both Sri Lanka's colonial history and Selvadurai's diasporic status. These texts do not share national origins, but instead have in common an association with both the feminine and the popular. And, unsurprisingly, more often than not they are romances. This intertextual array demonstrates the difference between Hollinghurst's literary intervention and the literary tradition Selvadurai responds to.

Different kinds of Sri Lankan popular culture are referenced frequently in *Funny Boy*, a tendency Gayatri Gopinath ascribes to many queer South Asian diasporic texts. She claims that "South Asian popular culture acts as a repository of queer desiring relations" and goes on to trace the ways popular culture appears in these texts and signals queer desires.<sup>22</sup> Arjie's attachment to South Asian popular culture is linked to both

femininity and fantasy. For instance, his ideal of beauty comes from Sinhalese and Tamil films, two of the regional film industries in South Asia that compete with the Bombay industry. Arjie dwells on the images of the actresses Malini Fonseka and Geetha Kumarasinghe calling them goddesses and “graceful, benevolent, perfect being[s]” (5). They are his models when he dresses up in saris for the game bride-ride and it is them he thinks of when he watches his glamorous mother get ready to go out at night. But while the films supply him with images of beauty, it is the Sinhalese love comics which teach him the conventions of romance. He sneaks these comics from Janaki, his grandmother’s servant, and reads them while his cousins play in the gender-segregated spheres Arjie has been banished from. From the outset, therefore, the comics are aligned with gender non-conformity as well as with women and servants. Sri Lankan popular culture is thus part of what marks Arjie as queer and is also his respite from the heteronormative prohibitions of his upper-class family.

In contrast to the comics, which tell Arjie that love conquers all, *The King and I* teaches a lesson about racial prohibitions. Before he agrees to act in *The King and I*, the seven year-old Arjie queries his mother, who has seen the movie, about the plot. She describes it as the story of an English governess who goes to Siam to teach the King’s children and wives English and “other Western subjects.” Arjie, an avid reader, immediately interjects:

“Does she marry the king in the end?” I asked eagerly.

“Marry the king?” Amma repeated. She laughed. “You must be mad.”

“Why?” I cried, disappointed that the story didn’t end with a marriage.

“Because at that time people didn’t marry outside their race.”

“And now? I asked, determined to get a happy ending out of the story.

“If it was now, would they have married?”

Amma looked at me, irritated by my persistence. “I don’t know,” she said.

“Probably not.”



“But why not?”

“Because most people marry their own kind.” (53)

Arjie understands the narrative conventions of romance: the hero and heroine should marry at the end of the play. He is not as familiar with the dictates of racial prejudice. His mother, on the other hand, is very aware of the social taboos that keep interracial couples apart. We later learn that as a teenager she had a forbidden love affair with a young man from a Burgher family, an affair that is rekindled during her marriage to Arjie’s father. However Amma is unable to explain the rationale behind the prohibition. Recalling an earlier moment in the novel when she cannot explain to Arjie why he must play with boys and not girls and thus relies on the nonsense phrase “because pigs can’t fly,” logic fails her when discussing why “most people marry their own kind.” This echoing of the earlier scene links the taboo of not conforming to gender roles with the forbidden crossing of racial boundaries. Throughout the novel, Selvadurai uses Arjie’s childlike perspective to expose the irrationality of both racial prejudice and restrictive gender norms. Tellingly, these racial prejudices are embodied by lovers divided, lovers like Anne Leonowens and King Mongkut in *The King and I*.<sup>23</sup> *Funny Boy* places this interracial romance alongside other stories of lovers divided by social conventions and ethnic prejudices, stories that trouble the trope of star-crossed lovers who conquer all obstacles. The novel gently chides Arjie for his naïvete and his lack of awareness of political realities—realities which affect all intimate relationships in war-torn Sri Lanka—yet it desperately wishes that the myth of love conquering all was true.

*Funny Boy*’s reference to *The King and I* does more, however, than just highlight the trope of the interracial union—it allows Arjie to model an affectively-engaged mode of reading. The passage I quote from above focuses on affect: Arjie’s eagerness, his

disappointment, and his desire. Arjie approaches the play emotionally; he wants to be satisfied by the story, a satisfaction that he identifies with witnessing a romance that culminates in marriage. But in the case of *The King and I* his desire and, in fact, determination to “get a happy ending out of the story,” only leads to disappointment. Consequently, Arjie explains, “I found my enthusiasm for *The King and I* ebbing. I couldn’t see the point of a play where the hero and heroine didn’t get married at the end” (53). *Funny Boy* creates a similar desire for a happy ending in readers. We are positioned to want each of the relationships in the novel to succeed, yet political forces eventually tear the lovers apart. As these relationships are thwarted by political tensions and ethnic hatred, we are encouraged to despise the forces that divide them. In this way, Selvadurai engages readers in Sri Lankan politics by having them invest in romance, which Arjie models how to read. It is not enough that we know this prejudice is wrong; we must *feel* it. Thus, as “Radha Aunty” chronicles how Arjie unlearns the expectations about romance he has absorbed from popular culture and discovers the political realities which can divide lovers, it also positions audiences to support Arjie’s own later romance.

At the beginning of “Radha Aunty,” Arjie is completely invested in a naïve, idealistic view of romance that has been shaped by the love comics he reads. In one particularly telling scene, Arjie reads a comic and substitutes his aunt and Anil for the characters on its pages. He imagines Radha as the mythic Sakuntala and Rajan, the man her family wants her to marry, as Sakuntala’s lover, Mani-lal:

I imagined them standing under an araliya tree, Radha Aunty leaning against its trunk with her head bent modestly, a slight tear in her eye; Rajan Nagendra, his hand pressed against the tree, his face serious as he implored her to marry him. Now Sakuntala started to cry, just as I imagined Radha Aunty would. I turned the page, and, there, Mani-lal had taken her in his arms. He would ask her parents for their consent. Sakuntala now nodded meekly. I turned the pages rapidly. The part

about asking the parents and their refusing didn't interest me. I wanted to reach the inevitable end, about the wedding. Sakuntala smiling through her tears, Mani-lal, a fierce look of pride on his face. I closed the comic book. My feelings were so stirred up that I couldn't sit still any longer. (43)

According to the comic's conventions, the heroine should appear "meek" and "modest," and the hero "serious," "proud," and forceful. He should act; she should wait and react. There may be resistance from their parents, but "the inevitable end" will be a wedding. As he did with the story of *The King and I*, Arjie approaches the romance narratives he reads with much feeling. He becomes "so stirred up" that he cannot sit still; his feelings are so strong that he is physically moved by them. His satisfaction is again tied to a wedding: Arjie gets the most pleasure from imagining the wedding between Mani-lal and Sakuntala and disregards the obstacles the pair will face. Reading is not a passive act for Arjie. It means actively imagining something—in this case a marriage. If this event does not occur in the text, Arjie constructs a fantasy space inside his imagination, one whose details mirror his desires and not necessarily the reality of the text.

As Arjie reads, he stops distinguishing between Radha and Sakuntala and Rajan and Mani-lal, imposing the characteristics of the imaginary hero and heroine onto his aunt and her suitor. This slippage between Radha and the mythic Sakuntala is possible, in part, because Arjie has not seen Radha since he was three and cannot remember what she looks like:

My imagination, however, was quick to fill in this void. Since my idea of romance and marriage was inseparable from Sinhala films and Janaki's love comics, the picture I formed of Radha Aunty bore a strong resemblance to that goddess of the Sinhala screen Malini Fonseka. (42)

The real Radha Aunty, however, immediately contradicts his expectations of the romantic heroine:

She couldn't have been more different from the way I had pictured her. The first and biggest difference between the imagined Radha Aunty and the real one was the color of her skin. She was a karapi, as dark as a laborer. Worse, her hair was long and frizzy...She was thin, not plump, and, as Amma would have said, "flat like a boy." (45)

Both her looks—her "dark" skin, "frizzy" hair, and "thin" figure—and her behavior contrast with Arjie's ideas of how a heroine in a romance should be. For instance, when he first meets Radha after her return from America, she plays Chopsticks on the piano very badly. Arjie responds, "It was unthinkable that a woman who was on the brink of marriage could look like this and play the piano so badly" (46). At first, Anil, the Sinhalese suitor, also disappoints Arjie:

He didn't fit my idea of what a lover looked like. He was fairly tall and, though not thin, his body was angular and a little awkward...he looked like someone too young to be a lover. Also, he was not serious enough. (66)

Over the course of the story, however, both Radha and Anil become more appealing to Arjie and he comes to sympathize with their plight. As his views of Radha and Anil change, so do his views of romance. He expands his idea of what lovers should act and look like, and, as he watches this romance unfold, begins to understand love is not exempt from political forces.

Like the other stories in the novel, "Radha Aunty" is structured around an epiphany. The story ends with Arjie describing what he has learned and, more importantly, how his feelings have changed:

As the pastor began his prayer, I gazed at Radha Aunty and Rajan Nagendra and thought of the first time I had heard about the marriage proposal, how I had looked around this drawing room and imagined it transformed by the preparations for the wedding, the buying of the sari, the making of the confetti, the wrapping of the cake, the pala harams and jasmine garlands. I knew that soon this would all come to pass, that I would find myself in the midst of that family wedding I had so longed to be a part of. But I felt no pleasure, for I knew that although

everything would happen in the way I had dreamed, there would be something important missing. (96)

The “something important” is the all-powerful love Arjie had assumed formed the basis of marriages. The trappings of weddings—the sari, cake, and jasmine garlands—are no longer what matter to Arjie. His beliefs have been shattered and his pleasure in the wedding he initially longed for is gone. As he watches Radha Aunty get engaged to Rajan, Arjie muses on how his feelings have changed:

I thought of bride-ride and all those elaborate ceremonies I had invented, how I had thought that weddings could not be anything but magical occasions. How distant that time seemed, a world I had left far behind. . . . I thought of [Janaki’s] love comics and how fervently I had believed in them; believed that if two people loved each other everything was possible. Now, I knew that this was not so. (96-7)

It is not an intellectual lesson Arjie learns but an emotional one. This is a novel about the education of Arjie’s feelings; he must learn not only to understand his world correctly but, more importantly, to feel correctly. And by witnessing his sentimental education, audiences too are educated. Much like Arjie, our education is not just intellectual, factual, or abstract; instead we are made to *feel* appropriately. The novel chronicles this education of Arjie’s feelings and, in the process, seeks to educate its readers. We learn the facts of the conflict between Tamils and the Sinhalese and see how it affects ordinary people on a personal level, but the novel’s primary allegory will come later. Arjie’s education as he witnesses Radha and Anil’s relationship foreshadows the novel’s climax. In the next part of this chapter, I read this pivotal event in the narrative—Arjie’s romance with a Sinhalese classmate—and consider what happens to the queer national romance when it merges with the coming out story and exilic literature.

### **Always a “Funny” Boy: a Coming Out Story**

By definition a coming out story chronicles an individual’s “discovery” of his or her homosexuality and their reaction to this realization. Similar to other coming out stories, *Funny Boy* narrates Arjie’s coming of age and his gradual recognition of himself as “funny.”<sup>24</sup> Yet unlike most of these stories, the novel illustrates how Arjie develops as a political as well as a sexual subject. Arjie learns about the national politics of Sri Lanka and his place within it by observing romances and, eventually, having one himself. On the one hand, his dual education reveals the novel’s contention that sexual and national subjectivities are deeply imbricated, and, in this respect, *Funny Boy* is a unique coming out story. On the other hand, *Funny Boy* shows what it constructs as Arjie’s already-present homosexuality with tropes very familiar to readers of coming out stories: Arjie cross-dresses, he desires other boys, and, eventually, he begins to self-identify as different from others because of his gender presentation and sexual object choice. In what follows, I examine *Funny Boy*’s adherence to and deviation from the conventions of the coming out story and the ways that these generic constraints intersect with the conventions of the queer national romance and exile narrative.

As Elspeth Probyn argues, “childhood is a staple of the coming out story, a point at which many recollect the realization of their queerness.”<sup>25</sup> *Funny Boy*’s focus on childhood is, therefore, typical. Yet Selvadurai uses Arjie’s status as a child and his lack of knowledge for another purpose as well: to educate readers unfamiliar with the Sri Lankan political context. When the novel opens, Arjie has no knowledge of the political tensions in Sri Lanka and is unaware of the divide between Tamils and Sinhalese. He knows many Sinhalese and is in a Sinhalese class at school. Readers learn about the

politics of this especially fraught period alongside Arjie. This address to an uninformed reader makes clear the novel's anticipation of an international audience. Thus the coming out story's convention of using childhood as a vantage point not only allows for the education of readers but also invokes a familiar convention of the coming out story.

Childhood in the coming out story is often marked by cross-gender behavior or identification, a trope included in *Funny Boy*. The story "Pigs Can't Fly," in particular, focuses on Arjie's cross-gender behavior, a behavior it constructs as "natural":

It was to this territory of "the girls," confined to the back garden and the kitchen porch, that I seem to have gravitated naturally, my earliest memories of those spend-the-days always belonging in the back garden of my grandparents' home.  
(3)

His identification with what he calls girls' activities is, the narrator asserts, "natural" and is part of Arjie's "earliest memories," implying that this identification is at the core of his personality. Arjie goes on to describe the pleasure he took in dressing as a bride in the elaborate fantasy game he and his female cousins would play and contrasts this joy with his distaste for the boys' endless games of cricket out in the hot sun. Arjie's characterization evokes a common critique leveled at coming out stories; they depict sexuality as a truth that has always been there but may not have been available to the narrator. Biddy Martin argues, "Many of the coming-out-stories are tautological insofar as they describe a process of coming to know something that has always been true, a truth to which the author has returned."<sup>26</sup> Ed Cohen claims that the function of the coming out story is, in fact, "to recount the individual's discovery of his or her emergent (gay) identity and hence to retroactively constitute that identity."<sup>27</sup> According to Martin and Cohen, then, coming out stories construct sexuality rather than just describe it. Moreover, they depict that sexuality as the "truth" of an individual's identity. *Funny Boy* exhibits

this tendency when it portrays Arjie's sexuality as "natural" and having been a part of him since his "earliest memories."

One of the problems with constructing sexuality as natural is the subsequent tendency to privilege sexuality over all other facets of identity such as race, class, gender, or ethnicity. As Robert McRuer notes, this is an often maligned aspect of the coming out story: "theorists have critiqued coming-out stories for their emphasis on the discovery of an individual and essential gay identity, unmarked by other categories of difference, such as race or class."<sup>28</sup> Martin Duberman makes a related but slightly different critique when he chides the gay community for what he sees as a move away from an earlier radical politics that acknowledged the constructed nature of sexuality and towards a coming out based on "discovering" an essential sexuality that focuses on an individual's search for self-respect. "Many coming-out narratives," he argues, "may be seen as products of this shift toward individualism and essentialism."<sup>29</sup> Although *Funny Boy* constructs Arjie's sexuality as natural, it avoids both of these pitfalls. It not only addresses gender and ethnicity as well as sexuality, it strives to portray the complex interactions between these facets of identity. Moreover, *Funny Boy* is committed to a larger struggle for minority rights, as I will discuss later.

Another way in which *Funny Boy* is generically different from most coming out stories is in its incorporation of some of the conventions of the exile narrative. One example of this blending of genres comes when Arjie's family eventually forbids him to cross-dress and play with his girl cousins. This kind of parental prohibition is typical of the coming out story, yet as Arjie reflects upon this censure we see the conventions of exilic literature coming into play as well:



Now both the beach and the sea, once so familiar, were like an unknown country into which I had journeyed by chance. . . . No more would I step out of that room and make my way down the porch steps to the altar, a creature beautiful and adored, the personification of all that was good and perfect in the world. . . . And then there would be the loneliness. I would be caught between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging, not wanted in either. (39)

Arjie uses the language and conventions of exile to explain his feelings at this common event in the coming out story. He describes the once familiar landscape as “an unknown country” he has “journeyed” to, and the girls' and boys' spaces as separate “worlds,” worlds he does not belong in. This description of being suspended between worlds is typical of exilic literature, as is the nostalgia for the lost world. The emphasis on not belonging is also a hallmark of the coming out story. This focus on spaces and being exiled from spaces continues on throughout the novel, finally culminating in Arjie's literal exile from Sri Lanka. Yet as Gopinath notes, unlike other tales of exile, home for Arjie is always “permanently and already ruptured” because of his status as “funny” (484).

Despite the fact that Arjie's gender identity leads to him being labelled “funny,” a “pansy,” “a faggot,” a “sissy,” and a “girlie-boy” early on, his sexual desires are not mentioned until relatively late in the novel. In the story “Small Chances,” Arjie meets Jegan, the son of his father's dearest childhood friend and a member of the nationalist organization the Tamil Tigers. While Arjie and the much-older Jegan never become sexually involved, they develop a strong friendship. And although Arjie does not understand his own desires for Jegan, readers are positioned to interpret them as homoerotic. For instance, Arjie describes Jegan's physical form at length noticing “the strength of his body” and “the way his thighs pressed against his trousers” (156-7). He follows these observations with a confession about his growing admiration for men:

“Lately, I had found that I looked at men, at the way they were built, the grace with which they carried themselves, the strength of their gestures and movements” (157). He explains this as curiosity about his own adolescence and development, but readers see it differently as a sign of desire. Significantly, Arjie’s feelings for Jegan are not only physical; they are deeply emotional:

The thought of Jegan moving into our home, of my being in constant contact with him, filled me with an unaccountable joy. I felt that his presence would invest this commonplace, familiar environment with something extraordinary...The place seems to have become sacred by his presence. (158-9)

This focus on emotion—Arjie’s “joy” and his feeling that Jegan will make everything “sacred”—and not solely sexual desire alerts readers that we are not only learning about the protagonist’s desire for other boys, something common in all coming out stories, we are also being positioned to want his future romance with Shehan to thrive. Focusing on Arjie’s emotional as well as sexual attraction to men helps set the stage for his future romance.

Making the link again between sexual and political awakenings, Arjie’s first experience of romantic and sexual desire occurs with a character who is associated with the Tamil Tigers. By linking homoerotic desire and Tamil nationalism *Funny Boy* counteracts the idea of homosexuality as a Western import. Jegan furthers the association between homoerotic desire and nationalism when he narrates the story of his days in the nationalist movement by explaining his romance with another boy who moved to Canada after being tortured by police.

“A friend. We worked together in the Gandhiyam movement.” He looked at me. “In fact, you remind me of him, when he was your age. We were...we were very good friends.” (171)

Arjie does not miss the suggestive nature of Jegan's words and the connotations of his hesitations. He reflects, "I could tell [Jegan] had loved him very much; his having been tortured had affected him deeply" (172). The Tamil Tigers are not the only homosocial organization in the novel that leads to potentially homoerotic bonds. Placed alongside Jegan's relationship with his "friend" in the nationalist organization, Arjie's father's homosocial relationship with Buddy, Jegan's father, when they were at school looks decidedly homoerotic. By making the link between the homosocial and the homoerotic, both of these relationships set the stage for Arjie's own relationship, which also takes place at school.

Although these earlier stories establish Arjie's "funniness," it is "The Best School of All" which functions as the core of the novel's coming out tale. In this story Arjie attends a new school—a school his father hopes will "make him a man"—where he meets and falls in love with Shehan. This story incorporates both the conventions of the coming out story and the national romance. In typical coming out story fashion, Arjie recognizes his desire for Shehan as sexual, acts on this desire, feels disgust for his actions, and comes to terms with his desire. At the same time, it follows the conventions of the national romance: Arjie meets Shehan, learns of the ethnic divide between them, is asked to take sides along ethnic lines, and, instead, aligns himself with Shehan. *Funny Boy* solicits audience support for Arjie and Shehan's relationship by employing traditional romance conventions. For instance, obstacles such as prejudice, familial pressure, internalized homophobia, and, most significantly, rising ethnic tension all seek to divide the boys. In this political climate, any relationship between a Sinhalese and a Tamil, let alone a gay relationship, is taboo. The lovers become victims of prejudice whom we

champion. Moreover, the tragic failure of the other forbidden loves in the narrative also conditions readers to support Arjie and Shehan's love. The violence of the riots and other instances of ethnic prejudice Selvadurai depicts makes readers long for alternate visions of Sinhala/Tamil interaction. The romance between Arjie and Shehan provides this alternative and we root for the two young lovers as they struggle to be together.

### **“Taking it Like a Man”: the Queer National Romance Comes Out**

In “The Best School of All,” Arjie leaves his old school and begins to attend the Queen Victoria Academy, which will, in his father's words, “force [him] to become a man” (205). The Queen Victoria Academy is modeled on the British colonial system of education, and it is here where Arjie has his first sexual relationship with another boy. Although many nationalist movements see queerness and the fight for homosexual rights as Western imports and posit homophobia as indigenous and traditional, in the South Asian context it was the British who first legislated against homosexuality. Prior to the passage of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code there were no legal consequences for male same-sex behavior in South Asia. Thus it is ironic that it is in this homophobic, rigid, conformist environment that Arjie falls in love and learns to accept his “funniness.” By locating Arjie's first sexual and romantic relationship at the Queen Victoria Academy *Funny Boy* links queer desire with both the homosocial and the colonial project. Moreover, by placing Arjie and Shehan's relationship within a power struggle in their school that mirrors the national conflict, the novel establishes their story as a queer national romance. It is through their relationship that Arjie begins to understand the difference in himself he has always felt but has been unable to define. He begins to see

himself as part of a group and to identify with others. Significantly, the person he identifies with is Sinhalese, and the boys bond over a shared sexual, not ethnic, identity.

Arjie and Shehan are initially drawn to each other because of their shared status as outsiders: Arjie because of his status as a Tamil boy in a Sinhala class,<sup>30</sup> Shehan because of his sexual rebelliousness (he is rumored to have had sex with the head prefect). Their relationship follows a fairly traditional narrative arc: they meet when Shehan protects Arjie from bullies, their friendship develops based on their shared outsider status, the relationship becomes sexual, obstacles come between them, and they overcome the obstacles only to be separated when Arjie's family leaves Sri Lanka. Like many coming out stories, the novel documents Arjie's initial difficulty accepting his own desires and he rejects Shehan after they first have sex. Eventually, however, Arjie comes to terms with his feelings for Shehan and accepts his desires. In one of the story's many moments of epiphany, Arjie says, "I saw that I had misjudged what we had done in the garage. Shehan had not debased me or degraded me, but rather had offered me his love. And I had scorned it" (262). Their relationship continues for months until Arjie's family emigrates to Canada after the riots. Yet unlike a typical coming out story, the novel juxtaposes Arjie and Shehan's relationship with the power struggle going on at the Victoria Academy, itself a microcosm of the national struggle for definition going on in Sri Lanka.

The school is run by a very strict principal known as Black Tie who, tellingly, wears a *sola topee*, the hat that is the mark of British colonial administrators. Black Tie beats students who break rules to help them avoid becoming the future "ills and burdens" of society, and his sadism is legendary at the school. He is rumored to have made a

student kneel in the hot sun until he passed out and he caned a boy for blinking at him. As Arjie's brother Diggy explains, there is no recourse against Black Tie; at the Academy you must "take it like a man" and never complain. Arjie experiences Black Tie's cruelty first hand when he is caned for not being able to recite two poems he has been ordered to memorize. Shehan is treated even more severely by Black Tie because his hair is not cut to regulation length and he seems to flaunt school rules. The boys bond as they suffer under Black Tie's repressive regime together. Complicating matters is a power struggle going on at the school between Black Tie and the vice principal Mr. Lokubandara. Although both men are Sinhalese, Black Tie favors a British model of education, while Mr. Lokubandara wants to make the school more traditionally Sinhala. He would like to transform the Academy into a Buddhist school, in effect expelling all of the Tamil students who are Hindu. Moreover, Mr. Lokubandara sanctions Sinhalese students' violence against Tamil students.

This power struggle mirrors, to a certain degree, the situation in Sri Lanka in the 1970s and 1980s when the conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese was being played out in a battle over language and culture. Under British rule, English was the official language of Ceylon. Although this devalued all non-European cultures on the island and marginalized literature in both Tamil and Sinhalese, it had at least one benefit: during colonial rule English served as a sort of bridge language, at least for the educated of both groups. After independence, as Sinhala and Tamil were increasingly used in business, education, and government, contact between the Sinhalese and the Tamils became more limited because of this language barrier.<sup>31</sup> Then in June of 1956, The Official Language Act was passed and signed into law by President Bandaranaike. This hotly-contested act

made Sinhala the official national language and contained no requested safeguards for minorities like the translation of official documents, the practice of giving exams in both languages, or the use of Tamil for administrative purposes in Tamil-dominated areas. The nationalists who fought for this law did so because they feared the dominance of the Tamil language. Although the Tamils are a minority in Sri Lanka, they form a much larger group than the Sinhalese on the subcontinent. More educational resources, books, and even films are produced in Tamil than in Sinhala.<sup>32</sup> The Language Act was meant to ensure the continued relevance of Sinhala, yet it had implications far beyond that.

In fact, the Language Act was part of a broader movement of Sinhala nationalism. Economic incentives from the government that encouraged Sinhalese settlement in Tamil areas, ethnic quotas on university admission, and the Language Act all worked together to diminish Tamil influence in government and education, the areas in which Tamils had previously held an advantage. Clearly these policies were designed to have an economic impact and were not the harmless assertions of Sinhalese pride nationalists sometimes claimed. For instance, Tamils could not be employed in official positions unless they had a strong command of Sinhalese. This nationalism culminated in the adoption of a new constitution that took effect in 1972. The constitution installed Buddhism as the nation's "foremost religion" and contained few safeguards for other religions. It also made Sinhalese the language of law and government, revoking any concessions earlier administrations had made. Soon after it was put in place, the call for an independent Tamil homeland became louder and separatists became more influential, especially among Tamil youth who were increasingly frustrated by what they saw as the failure of legislative politics. This was the moment when many youth turned away from electoral

politics and towards more violent means of effecting change and membership in guerilla groups swelled. Cultural politics in general and the struggle over language in particular were crucial, therefore, in the escalation of violence in Sri Lanka. It is this context that the power struggle between the two factions at school alludes to.

While Black Tie symbolizes British colonial education and the rigidity and brutality that sometimes accompanied it, he also represents the continuance of a multi-ethnic system and stands against the type of nationalism which led to the 1972 Constitution and later riots.<sup>33</sup> Yet despite this complication, Arjie fears and hates him for his persecution of Shehan and his cruelty:

I was not sure that, as a Tamil, my loyalties lay with Black Tie. I thought of Mr. Lokubandara and the way Salgado and his friends had assaulted that Tamil boy. I thought of the way Black Tie had beaten both Shehan and me. Was one better than the other? I didn't think so. Although I did not like what Mr. Lokubandara stood for, at the same time I felt that Black Tie was no better. (242)

Arjie is unwilling to excuse Black Tie's sadism and side with him because of ethnic loyalty. Instead, he criticizes both men for their cruelty and finds parallels in their actions. The brutality of both the colonial legacy and the nationalist ethnic prejudice are problematic; the injustice of one does not negate the injustice of the other. In the story's climax, Arjie takes a stand against Black Tie in an effort to help Shehan. As he does so, he chooses an identification with Shehan based on their shared queerness. In a country where much of the Tamil population wants a separate state, Arjie's rejection of ethnic solidarity is unexpected. In this scene, which I read below, Arjie gets the opportunity to strike out against Black Tie when he is chosen to recite two poems at a school assembly for a powerful minister of the cabinet who is an alumnus of the Academy.



The poems Arjie is asked to recite represent the values Black Tie holds dear and will serve as the basis of the speech he will give as he attempts to retain control over the school. By Sir Henry Newbolt, a British poet writing between 1897 and 1907, the poems paint a nostalgic picture of the British colonial school. Newbolt edited *A Book of Verse Chosen for Students at Home and Abroad*, designed as an aid to students “in India or the Dominions” because “it is of importance for every citizen of the Empire to understand the working of the historic English mind, and the English mind cannot be studied with any depth and certainty unless in the field of English literature, and especially of English poetry.”<sup>34</sup> Unlike every other reference in the novel to literature and popular culture, Arjie does not identify with or find pleasure in Newbolt’s poems; they are the antithesis of the female-associated popular culture Arjie feels connected to. In fact, he despises them and their valorization of school calling them “foolish lines” which “spoke of a reality I didn’t understand” (227). These masculinist, colonialist poems do not reflect Arjie’s experience at all and he seeks ways to negate them. At one point he rips them to shreds, at another he makes fun of them with Shehan, and, finally, he refuses to recite them.

The first poem, “Vitai Lampada,” describes a cricket match and then parallels it with a scene of war. Cricket and other school traditions, the poem implicitly argues, train boys to “Play up! play up! and play the game!” and continue on in the face of hardship and danger, referencing a common Victorian belief that games like cricket taught valor, loyalty and fairness. Moreover, the poem alludes to the use of cricket in particular and sports more generally as a metaphor for war and imperialism. In contrast to what the poem says, Arjie points out that at the Academy cricket often involved cheating and manipulation, not honor and fairness. The second poem “The Best School of All” strikes

a similar tone as it describes boys becoming men at school and stresses the value of the British educational system. It takes a sentimental, nostalgic view of school, painting it as the best days of one's life:

For, working days or holidays,  
And glad or melancholy days,  
They were great days and jolly days  
At the best School of all.<sup>35</sup>

Arjie responds, "I found it puzzling that one would be nostalgic for something one had longed to escape" and vows to never replace his memories of his own experiences at the school with nostalgic fantasies (43). The poem goes on to construct a community of boys who have passed through this unnamed school—the "we" of the poem—who accept its values:

We'll honour yet the School we knew  
The best School of all:  
We'll honour yet the rule we knew,  
Till the last bell call.

While individuals may die, the poem asserts further on, the community lives on in the traditions of the school and in the hearts and minds of all those who pass through its walls. Arjie objects to this nostalgic view of the place where he and Shehan are persecuted and resents the re-casting of the institution's brutality as "traditions" which help boys become men. Many of the "traditions" that Arjie experiences—the punishment of non-conformity, the strict gender rules and enforced masculinity, and the harsh treatment—are indeed remnants of the British educational system that the poems and Black Tie view so sentimentally. And Arjie rejects these characteristics, even though it means acting against what he is told are his own best interests by other Tamils.

Arjie decides to mangle the poems during his recitation and thus make it impossible for Black Tie to give a coherent speech. After he ruins the speech, causing Black Tie to sit down in humiliation in front of the entire school and the visiting minister, Arjie tells Shehan, “I did it for you. . . . I couldn’t bear to see you suffer anymore” (277). While this may be his main motivation, Arjie is also striking back against the poems themselves and the masculinist and colonialist values they represent. He “renders them senseless” much as they render his life illegible. Arjie sees choosing Shehan over ethnic solidarity as an act of resistance against unjust, powerful forces in society. Before he makes the decision to ruin the assembly, Arjie ponders the nature of injustice:

I thought of Shehan and myself. What had happened between us in the garage was not wrong. For how could loving Shehan be bad? Yet if my parents or anybody else discovered this love, I would be in terrible trouble. I thought of how unfair this was and I was reminded of things I had seen happen to other people, like Jegan, or even Radha Aunty, who, in their own way, had experienced injustice. How was it that some people got to decide what was correct or not, just or unjust? It had to do with who was in charge; everything had to do with who held power and who didn’t. If you were powerful like Black Tie or my father you got to decide what was right or wrong. If you were like Shehan or me you had no choice but to follow what they said. But did we always have to obey? Was it not possible for people like Shehan and me to be powerful too? I thought about this, but no answer presented itself to me. (268)

In this passage Arjie makes explicit the connection the novel has been making all along of equating different characters’ struggles against oppressive forces. Radha Aunty has been deterred from marrying a man she loves because he is Sinhalese, Jegan is persecuted for his Tamil nationalist commitments by a repressive government that does not tolerate dissent, and Shehan and Arjie are mistreated by Black Tie for their alleged crimes. On a much greater scale, members of Arjie’s family are beaten and killed because they are Tamils. The consequences of homophobia and rigid gender roles are thus explicitly linked with the consequences of ethnic violence and government persecution. This scene

is a didactic moment—another epiphany—and, in some ways, it is an oversimplification. Homophobia, racism, and political repression are not exactly the same thing nor are the consequences the same, although they are all forms of oppression. Yet, as Arjie notes, they are all instances of the powerful persecuting the less powerful. One of *Funny Boy*'s greatest strengths is its ability to make audiences with diverse concerns care about the same character and thus reconceptualize their own affiliations. In this passage, those concerned with government repression are asked to see its connection to homophobia. The costs of ethnic prejudice are linked to the costs of other injustices. The novel positions its readers to sympathize with Arjie and stand against all of these injustices.

However, Arjie's act is not depicted as a clear-cut victory, and the scene where he ruins the poems seems meant to leave readers anxious. We are made uncomfortable as we wonder about the results of his action. Shehan, the novel suggests, will no longer be persecuted by Black Tie. But will Lokubandara take over the school and transform it into a nationalist space where Tamils are not welcome? Was Arjie naïve to try to save his lover at the expense of such important political principles? Readers never find out the answers to these questions, although we are led to believe Black Tie will lose power. What, then, does it mean that Arjie has chosen to honor affective bonds of romance over ethnic or even family ties? Is this the rash move of a child who misunderstands the political landscape and his place in it or is it an act of resistance we are meant to applaud?

Arjie's choice *is* undoubtedly political: he rejects ethnic solidarity and embraces a queer identity based on a recognition of Shehan and himself as different from others, a realization he comes to right before mangling the poems. After his brother Diggy warns Arjie against spending so much time with Shehan, Arjie has an epiphany:

Then the meaning of what Diggy had said hit me, and a realization began to take shape in my mind. A fact so startling that it made my head spin just to think about it. The difference within me that I sometimes felt I had, that had brought me so much confusion, whatever this difference, it was shared by Shehan. I felt amazed that a normal thing—like my friendship with Shehan—could have such powerful and hidden possibilities. I found myself thinking about that moment Shehan had kissed me and also of how he had lain on his bed, waiting for me to carry something through. I now knew that the kiss was somehow connected to what we had in common, and Shehan had known this all along. (250)

Arjie had never before linked his “difference” from other boys—his gender-crossing behavior and his love of the artifacts of femininity—with his nascent desires for men. Suddenly Arjie begins to conceive of this difference as something he has “in common” with someone; it is “shared” although “hidden.” Although he still has no name for these behaviors and feelings, he recognizes an affinity with Shehan that comforts him. Since Arjie has never before felt this kind of shared identity, Shehan becomes incredibly significant to the story. It is because of Shehan that Arjie recognizes aspects of himself and through him that Arjie begins to see himself as a political subject. In this way, “The Best School of All” follows the trajectory of the typical coming out story: the protagonist’s discovery of a “gay” community—in this case represented by an individual— and his conceiving of himself as part of this community alongside a turning away from other affiliations.

Having Arjie discover a shared identity with a Sinhalese and not a Tamil boy establishes affiliation, friendship, and love as the basis of communal identity. Family and ethnic ties are deemphasized as Arjie’s affair with Shehan changes how he perceives the world, including his relationship with his family:

What had happened between Shehan and me over the last few days had changed my relationship with [Amma] forever. I was no longer a part of my family in the same way. I now inhabited a world they didn’t understand and into which they couldn’t follow me. (278)

As I mentioned earlier, the novel depicts the many losses Arjie endures as exiles from particular spaces, starting with the injunction from his parents that he can no longer inhabit the girls' territory. Arjie is exiled first from the girls' world, next from his family, and, in the final story, from the nation. *Funny Boy* is a novel about loss, and Arjie's loss of entry into various spheres mirrors the loss of home and nation he and his family experience as they are forced to leave Sri Lanka in the novel's final story.

### **Exceeding the Boundaries of the Queer National Romance: the "Riot Journal"**

While "The Best School of All" narrates union, the final section of *Funny Boy* is centered on images of discord. Rather than close with an image of the lovers united as *My Beautiful Laundrette* does, *Funny Boy* follows its depiction of Arjie and Shehan's romance with a chronicle of communal riots. "Riot Journal: an Epilogue" takes place seven months after Arjie and Shehan fall in love, and it documents Arjie's experiences during the riots that swept Sri Lanka in 1983. After days of anxious waiting and listening to radio reports of violence throughout the country, Arjie learns that the riots have finally spread to his neighborhood in Colombo. As a result, Arjie and his family are forced to flee in the middle of the night and hide at their neighbor's while next door a mob burns down their house. They all survive that riot, but days later the violence begins again and Arjie's grandparents are burned alive in their car. After the murder the family makes plans to immigrate to Canada, much to Arjie's relief: "I long to be out of this country. I don't feel at home in Sri Lanka any longer, will never feel safe again" (297).

“Riot Journal” is narrated according to conventions of exile, but it is also a diary, an epilogue, and, I believe, something altogether new created from the hybrid of these genres. I argue that *Funny Boy* abandons the genres it previously employed because their conventions are not adequate to narrate this traumatic moment in Sri Lanka’s history. The descriptions of the riots and their impact on Arjie’s family exceed the conventions of the coming out story, the queer national romance, and even the exile narrative. Thus Selvadurai creates a new form—the riot journal—and, in the process, illustrates some of the limitations of the queer national romance.

The most striking difference between “Riot Journal” and the other stories that make up *Funny Boy* is how it is narrated. The point of view is not new—Arjie is the first person narrator throughout the novel—but the voice and the tone of the prose alter dramatically. Although only seven months have passed since the previous story, Arjie has matured and his perspective has changed. In particular, he is more reflective and his interpretations are more sophisticated. Twice, for instance, he mentions the irony of an event, and throughout the story he treats his own emotions more analytically than he had earlier in the novel. An example of this new perspective occurs after he returns to his house the morning after it has burned down:

I observed all this with not a trace of remorse, not a touch of sorrow for the loss and destruction around me. Even now I feel no sorrow. I try to remind myself that the house is destroyed, that we will never live in it again, but my heart refuses to understand this. (291)

His inability to access his emotions is more symptomatic of trauma than maturity perhaps, but that he can narrate his own feelings so clearly and be reflective about them is evidence of his growth. *Funny Boy* chronicles Arjie’s maturation over the course of seven years and dwells on his first encounters with both love and loss. The novel is as

concerned with Arjie's evolution as an emotional subject as it is with his development as a political and sexual subject. It is not until now, as he experiences violence and loss on a scale he has never seen before, that his emotional development takes a sudden leap forward, a leap the novel illustrates in Arjie's ability to interpret, and consequently, narrate events.

Rather than a transparent narration of events that happened in the distant past like the other stories in *Funny Boy*, "Riot Journal" is written as if it is an actual diary that Arjie keeps during the riots. Thus it calls attention to itself as a written document and makes us aware of the fact that Arjie produces it. In a nod to diary conventions, each entry is preceded by the time and date and at various points in the narration Arjie mentions that he is writing. Narrative devices such as these lend an authenticity to the story and a documentary-like quality that seems appropriate for the chapter's content. The time and date stamp also adds a sense of immediacy to this story that is absent from the rest of *Funny Boy*. Time drags on at some points and then races by at others—as is marked by the time stamps—and some events are described in great detail while others are summarily noted. At times Arjie writes multiple entries in a single day. Marking the time helps convey some of the tension he feels and creates suspense in readers who also wait. For instance, on July 25<sup>th</sup>, Arjie makes entries at 6:00 a.m., 9:30, 11:00, 12:30 p.m., 1:00, and 6:45. At 11:30 that night he finally explodes, "This waiting is terrible. I wish the mob would come so that this dreadful waiting would end. No, I don't wish that. It is the last thing I want. Yet I know it's going to happen" (287).

The only thing that helps Arjie as he waits for the inevitable is writing. Writing becomes his only outlet, the one thing that brings even a slight respite from the anxiety:



“I have tried to read, but that is impossible, too. The only thing for me to do is write” (280). Whereas previously Arjie reads avidly, here he must produce his own texts. And, in fact, “Riot Journal” is the only story in *Funny Boy* that does not refer to any other texts—no film stars are mentioned, no love comics appear, and no allusions to *The King and I* or *Little Women* occur. Arjie writes compulsively and describes it as imperative; it is his coping mechanism. Even when his grandparents are missing and others are praying for their safe return Arjie can only write: “I should be praying too, but I can’t. All I can do is write in this book” (299). More than just a coping mechanism, however, writing becomes a way to fight back. In the final passage in the novel, Arjie returns to his ruined house and sees that it has been stripped of everything—even the flowers in the garden are gone. “My voice,” he says, “cried out loudly as if it were the only weapon I had against those who destroyed my life” (304). *Funny Boy* is Arjie’s lament against those who “destroyed [his] life.” Along with documenting the horrors perpetuated by the mobs, *Funny Boy* lays partial blame for the violence at the feet of the government who did nothing to stop the rioting and most likely encouraged it. Thus, in “Riot Journal,” the novel produces a powerful indictment of both government indifference and communal violence.

Early on in *Funny Boy*, Arjie discovers that the realities of his experiences rarely correspond to what he has expected. He wonders about this at a number of points in the novel musing, “but what I feel is nothing like what I imagined.” As this oft-repeated phrase suggests, the novel chronicles Arjie’s education; more specifically, we watch as he unlearns many of the expectations he has learned from texts. The phrase reappears in “Riot Journal” after Arjie’s house has burned down and he ponders how he feels:

The reality of losing our house is slowly beginning to sink in, but what I feel is nothing like what I imagined. I expected to be sad and nostalgic for a part of my life that is now destroyed. But I only get irritated and lethargic. It's the little things, the comforts and luxuries that I miss. The yearning for things like my records or my books or even the mat by my bed gnaws me until I think I must have them this moment or I will die. Then I become angry and frustrated because I can't have them...I long to be with Shehan. (298)

His feelings are different than he expected; instead of nostalgia or sadness he feels lethargy and irritation. In the above quotation Arjie comments that he longs for Shehan, but when he finally sees him that too is different than what he expects:

I have just returned from seeing Shehan. I can still smell his particular odor on my body, which always lingers on me after we make love...I am reluctant even to change my clothes for fear that I will lose this final momento. When we made love for the last time today, it was nothing like I imagined it would be—almost passionless, uncoordinated and tentative, lacking synchronization...I had dreaded our parting so much that, for fear of the pain, I had withdrawn from him. I suppose he had done the same thing. (303)

This visceral image of exile embodied in the last sexual encounter between the two boys stands in contrast to most exilic literature which is notoriously heteronormative.<sup>36</sup> *Funny Boy* narrates Arjie's exile from Sri Lanka in part through this description of leaving Shehan, yet the encounter fails to follow the conventions of either romance or exile. Instead it is less sentimental or nostalgic than is common in either genre. Arjie describes their lovemaking as "passionless, uncoordinated and tentative" and the scene is almost anti-romantic in its failure to provide grand gestures and passionate declarations. Exile, like love, is nothing like Arjie imagined it would be. Again he is learning how to feel; again his lesson comes through loss. Loss—the loss of childhood, home, Shehan, and nation—cannot be narrated in conventional ways. The novel responds by subverting expectations as it undoes some genre conventions. Most important for my purposes, the queer national romance is undone by the inclusion of this final section.

By acting against Black Tie in “The Best School of All” Arjie chooses a queer identity where ties are based on love not blood. He prioritizes affective and romantic bonds over ethnic loyalties and, in many ways, *Funny Boy* affirms this choice. Even so, the end of the novel sidelines Arjie and Shehan’s relationship. Selvadurai himself has said he has questions about the choice Arjie makes:

Does Arjie have a sense of betraying his heritage? The character tried to move above all that. The decision he makes is very complex; it after all brings about the ascendancy of the racist vice-principal at the school; he weighs that against Shehan’s suffering and decides to alleviate that suffering. I still don’t know what that says about me. I wrestled with that aspect of the story. It was frightening not being able to intellectualize. In the end, though, it just feels right, it’s political in that he’s choosing his “funny-ness.”<sup>37</sup>

Selvadurai sees Arjie as choosing a queer identity over an ethnic one; however, he is unsure if this is a betrayal of sort. Is it possible for a character (or a novel) to “move above” political realities when addressing such a fraught situation? Despite the fact that the novel gives voice to a Tamil perspective and records atrocities committed against Tamils in the 1970s and 1980s, Selvadurai describes *Funny Boy* as non-partisan:

I am not on any side—Tamil or Sinhalese. My approach is to go beyond statistics—the numbers of how many have been killed in terrorist attacks and communal riots—and show what really goes on in the everyday lives of individuals. Of course, doing that is a political act in itself.<sup>38</sup>

Yet regardless of Arjie’s choice to reject ethnic solidarity and side with his Sinhalese lover, he still becomes the target of communal violence.

In a sense, then, the text undermines Arjie’s narrative of queer solidarity and challenges the reconciliation promised by the queer national romance. In fact, “Riot Journal” exemplifies how violence becomes constitutive of communal difference, how it rewrites narratives. We see this in a scene when Shehan visits Arjie after his house is burned down and Arjie has a revelation:

As I listened to him talk, something occurred to me that I had never really been conscious of before—Shehan was Sinhalese and I was not. This awareness did not change my feelings for him, it was simply there, like a thin translucent screen through which I watched him. (295)

The difference between them is embodied as a thin screen that physically comes between them. Regardless of affect—Arjie’s feelings have not changed—and outside of his control, “it was simply there.” Despite the fact that Arjie has rejected communalism, the communal violence constitutes him as Tamil and Shehan as Sinhalese. Furthermore, Arjie’s rejection of ethnic solidarity does not protect him from others who see those ties differently. The queer national romance, it seems, cannot narrate this moment of communal violence in Arjie’s story. On the surface *Funny Boy* appears to be a queer national romance as well as a coming story and a tale of exile, but in the end exile and violence override these other genres, determining the course of the narrative and demanding a new form.

Amitav Ghosh writes eloquently about *Funny Boy* in an article on terrorism, violence, and exile in literature.<sup>39</sup> He distinguishes between what he calls stories of exodus that are about arrival and look forward and those he calls dispersal that only look back at what was left behind. *Funny Boy*, he argues, is a novel of dispersal:

The memory of dispersal is haunted always by the essential inexplicability of what has come to pass; by the knowledge that there was nothing inevitable, nothing predestined about what has happened; that far from being primordial, the enmities that have led to the sufferings of the present are new and unaccountable; that there was a time once, when neither protagonist saw the other as an adversary—a time that will be irrevocably lost with the dissolution of the history that made it possible for many parts to be a whole.<sup>40</sup>

This statement aptly describes the sadness of the political situation that Selvadurai is trying to convey. Nothing was inevitable and yet the time when the two sides were not adversaries is long past. To imagine otherwise would be to “imply the possibility of a

consolation” and that is unthinkable.<sup>41</sup> A future reconciliation in Sri Lanka may in fact happen; however, consolation for the devastation of forty years of civil war is impossible. Thus *Funny Boy* constructs an impossible union that we can look back on and desire but not quite imagine in the future.

At first glance *Funny Boy* appears to have little in common with *The Swimming-Pool Library*, but on closer inspection the two share a desire to interrogate the queer national romance. Both novels, as I have demonstrated, engage with the genre and even incorporate some of its tropes but do not, in the end, tell their stories as romances, queer or otherwise. A forward-looking genre, the queer national romance demands that the text be able to imagine reconciliation. These two novels focus instead on legacies of the past. Tamil nationalists fight for a separate state, the fantasy space of Eelam, while *Funny Boy* dreams of a united Sri Lanka but places that vision in the past. Thus *Funny Boy* stands as a challenge to Tamil as well as Sinhalese nationalism. The violence spawned by Sinhalese nationalism that has wrought such havoc on Sri Lanka is not excused in the novel, but Tamil nationalism and a separate state are not presented as the answer. Yet the nostalgic dream of a united Sri Lanka is set in the past and superceded by the vision of riots.

Film, in contrast, is much more likely to employ romance in general and more likely to use its iconic power to leave us with an image of union. Narrative closure by way of romantic union—the lovers riding off together into the sunset for instance—dominates many film traditions, regardless of genre or national industry. In my next chapter I examine another South Asian text that, I argue, also addresses communal violence: Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*.<sup>42</sup> Unlike Selvadurai, however, Mehta ends her film with

the lovers united. Thus, in this final chapter I turn my attention to a text which creates a same-sex romance between two women and then uses that union to make a powerful anti-communal argument.

---

<sup>1</sup> Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 143.

<sup>2</sup> Shyam Selvadurai, *Funny Boy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994). Subsequent references to this work will be given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Numbers of dead and displaced vary widely. For some estimates see Jagath Senaratne, *Political Violence in Sri Lanka, 1977-1990: Riots, Insurrections, Counterinsurgencies, Foreign Intervention* (Amsterdam: VU UP, 1997) and Oivind Fuglerud, *Life on the Outside: The Tamil Diaspora and Long Distance Nationalism* (London: Pluto Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Gayatri Gopinath, "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 479.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Janet St. John, Review of *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai, *Booklist* (September 1995); Jim Marks, "The Personal Is Political: an Interview with Shyam Selvadurai," *Lambda Book Report* 5, no. 2 (September 1996): 1-4.

<sup>7</sup> Ray Deonandan, "The Human Condition Explored," interview with Shyam Selvadurai, *India Currents Magazine*, April 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Smith, "Author Profile: Shyam Selvadurai," *Quill and Quire*, June 1998, [http://www.quillandquire.com/authors/profile.cfm?article\\_id=1083](http://www.quillandquire.com/authors/profile.cfm?article_id=1083).

<sup>9</sup> Jamie James, "The Toronto Circle," *Atlantic Monthly* 285, no. 4 (April 2000): 126-130.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Spencer, ed., *Sri Lanka: History and Roots of the Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1990), 5.

<sup>11</sup> A small minority of the Sinhalese are Christians.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Nissan and R.L. Stirrat, "The Generation of Communal Identity," in *History and the Roots of Conflict*, ed. Jonathan Spencer, 19 (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Spencer, 38.

<sup>14</sup> Rajiva Wijesinha, *Current Crisis in Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Navrang, 1986), 58-9.

<sup>15</sup> Senaratne, 48.

<sup>16</sup> Fuglerud, 1.

<sup>17</sup> The Indian Peace Keeping Force occupied Jaffna for three years, eventually leaving in 1990 when they were forced to admit they were unable to quell the Tiger insurrection. Many believe that the IPKF only exacerbated the already-difficult situation.

<sup>18</sup> A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *The Break-Up of Sri Lanka: The Sinhalese-Tamil Conflict*, (Honolulu, U of Hawaii P, 1988), 12.

<sup>19</sup> Spencer, 9.

---

<sup>20</sup> Burghers are the descendants of Dutch colonists who make up approximately .3% of Sri Lanka's population.

<sup>21</sup> Selvadurai's mother is Sinhalese and his father is Tamil, and he acknowledges that this affected his views on love: "For us children, growing up in a mixed marriage was interesting. From the start, our parents instilled in us the belief that the mixing of races only leads to stronger, more beautiful, more intelligent children. We firmly believed this and, further, pitied our other cousins because they were products of 'arranged' marriages whereas we were the product of a 'love' marriage. The story of our parents' meeting and their struggle to get married was the stuff of fairy stories and we never tired of getting my father to relate how he had fought with our grandmother for the hand of my mother and won." Shyam Selvadurai, Personal Website, <http://www.interlog.com/~funnyboy/index.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Gopinath, 484.

<sup>23</sup> In contrast to the famous film *The King and I* (1956), Anna Leonowen's *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870) and the novel and the play based on it *Anna and the King of Siam* (1944) do not portray a romance between Anna and King Mongkut. Rogers and Hammerstein added the romance to the plot when they turned the play into a musical in 1951 and this is the text upon which the film *The King and I* was based. *The King and I*, DVD, directed by Walter Lang (Twentieth Century Fox, 1956); Anna Leonowen, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court*, (Boston: Fields: Osgood, 1870); Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam* (New York: John Day, 1944).

<sup>24</sup> The novel does not use the words "gay" or "homosexual" but instead refers to Arjie as "funny," but Arjie's "funniness" conforms to fairly widespread understandings of homosexuality, as I demonstrate below.

<sup>25</sup> Elspeth Probyn, "Suspended Beginnings: Of Childhood and Nostalgia," *GLQ* 2, no. 4 (1995): 442.

<sup>26</sup> Biddy Martin, *Femininity Played Straight: the Significance of Being Lesbian* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 281.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Dennis Allen, "Homosexuality and Narrative," *Modern Fiction Studies* 41, no. 3-4 (1995), 615.

<sup>28</sup> Robert McRuer, "Boys' Own Stories and New Spellings of My Name: Coming Out and Other Myths of Queer Positionality," in *Eroticism and Containment: Notes from the Flood Plain*, ed. Carol Siegel and Ann Kibbey, 260-284 (New York: New York UP, 1994), 261.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>30</sup> His father has always insisted that he be placed in Sinhala classes because he believes Sinhalese is the language of the future and is necessary for Arjie's success.

<sup>31</sup> Lakshmanan Sabaratnam, *Ethnic Attachments in Sri Lanka: Social Change and Cultural Continuity* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 206.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>33</sup> Selvadurai's second novel, *Cinnamon Gardens*, directly addresses the British role in the establishment of Sri Lanka as a nation. Selvadurai, like others, sees many of Sri Lanka's current problems stemming from failures that came during the transition to independence. Shyam Selvadurai, *Cinnamon Gardens* (New York: Hyperion, 1999).

---

<sup>34</sup> Henry Newbolt, *A Book of Verse: Chosen for Students at Home and Abroad* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1922), v.

<sup>35</sup> *Funny Boy* quotes some verses of the poem but for the full text see Henry Newbolt, *Selected Poems of Sir Henry Newbolt* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1940).

<sup>36</sup> The heteronormativity of exile literature may result in part from the conventionality and adherence to tradition that characterizes many diasporic communities. For more on this see Gopinath.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted Marks, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Joel Yanofsky, "Writing his Way Back to Charmed Life: Success Comes Quickly to Shyam Selvadurai," *Gazette* (Montreal), October 8, 1994.

<sup>39</sup> Amitav Ghosh, "The Greatest Sorrow: Times of Joy Recalled in Wretchedness," *Kenyon Review* 25, no. 3/4 (2003): 86-99.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Fire*, DVD, directed by Deepa Mehta (Zeigeist Films, 1996).



#### 4. The Female National Romance: *Fire's* Queer Anti-Communalism

They have broken a *masjid*, ruined cricket pitches, burned paintings, choked music concerts and stopped a film from being screened. Mumbai just sits back and watches?

--Text of posters distributed throughout Mumbai<sup>1</sup>

In my second and third chapters I examined novels whose approaches to the queer national romance could not appear more different on the surface. *The Swimming-Pool Library* uses a series of failed unions to demonstrate the problems that accompany narrating the relationship between England and her former colonies in a queer romance, while *Funny Boy* envisions a temporary healing of war-torn Sri Lanka in the romance between Arjie and Shehan.<sup>2</sup> Although Selvadurai exemplifies how the genre can imagine a different sort of union in a postcolonial nation—one that seeks to heal communal rifts rather than legitimize inequality—he depicts the boys' relationship as ultimately unsustainable, setting the romance firmly in the past and ending the novel with the lovers separated. Consequently, I argued, *Funny Boy* is unable to imagine reconciliation in the present and instead shows us an impossible union which we may desire but which cannot continue. In the end then, both novels reject the queer national romance as inadequate for negotiating the particular struggles they seek to intervene in.

This chapter returns to film as I consider Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), a text that constructs a national romance out of the relationship between two Hindu, middle-class sisters-in-law in New Delhi.<sup>3</sup> *Fire's* release occasioned a great deal of controversy, particularly in India, and critics have thoroughly analyzed its reception. What has been neglected, I argue here, is the film itself. As I will demonstrate, *Fire* uses the romance between its two heroines to deliver a scathing critique of Hindu fundamentalism and to

protest communalism. Thus, this chapter accomplishes two primary goals: it continues to focus on texts from the South Asian diaspora but shifts to a different national context and it provides the opportunity to consider what changes when a queer national romance is constructed in the union between two women. I contend that although all of the texts I have looked at in this study challenge nationalist homophobia, texts where the two lovers are women also inherently disrupt fundamentalist discourses that see women solely as reproducers of the nation. A careful look at *Fire* reveals the way in which a romance between two women raises the specter of interracial/interreligious unions whether or not the women come from different communities. Female same-sex romances, therefore, contest discourses of racial, religious, and ethnic purity in ways queer national romances between men do not.

In early 1999, twenty thousand posters critiquing recent actions by Hindu fundamentalists were anonymously distributed and displayed throughout Mumbai. The posters referred to, among other events, the destruction of a mosque in Ayodhya, the attempt to cancel a cricket match between India and Pakistan, and efforts to prohibit *Fire* from being screened. As well as calling Mumbai to action, the posters linked various incidents and asked us to see their interconnections. While the most obvious connection is their origin—the Hindu nationalist group Shiv Sena was responsible for all of these attacks—these episodes have more in common than just their perpetrator; in each case, fundamentalists attempted to construct India as a Hindu nation made up of “appropriate” subjects. According to their worldview, India is for Hindu, heterosexual citizens and should not accommodate Muslims, Pakistanis, lesbians, or art that troubles these national definitions or constructs alternate subject positions. Those who do not conform to these

parameters have no place in the nation the Shiv Sena seeks to build. Angered by the fundamentalists' agenda, activists created the posters soon after the group attempted to stop *Fire* from being screened. Released in India in November of 1998, *Fire* elicited a violent reaction from Hindu fundamentalists who stormed theaters that were showing the film, set posters on fire, and physically threatened patrons and theater employees in cities across India. They claimed the film was an affront to "Indian" values and they were defending India from "alien" influences such as same-sex desire.

*Fire* tells the story of Radha and Sita, two sisters-in-law who fall in love while living in a middle-class, Hindu joint family in New Delhi. When the movie opens, Sita has just married Jatin and moved into the Kapur family's household only to find out that he loves another woman. Jatin and his girlfriend, a Chinese-Indian woman who works at a hair salon, continue to see each other and Sita is left on her own much of the time. Equally absent, Radha's husband Ashok spends most of his time with a swami who teaches his followers that desire is the root of all evil. Consequently, Ashok has taken a vow of celibacy and, as Radha puts it, they have "lived as brother and sister" for thirteen years. In their loneliness the women turn to each other and soon fall in love. Their relationship flourishes in the largely homosocial household, and the film depicts many sexually-charged encounters between the two as they perform mundane domestic tasks such as oiling each other's hair or working in the family's take-away shop. The brothers are oblivious to their wives' relationship, but Mundu, the family's servant, and Biji, the women's mother-in-law, see more clearly. Mundu eventually reveals their secret to Ashok who then catches Radha and Sita in bed together. Once their relationship is discovered, the women decide to leave the family and strike out on their own. In the

film's climax, Radha explains to Ashok why she is leaving with Sita. They argue and Ashok pushes her backwards. When she stumbles towards the stove, her sari catches on fire and she becomes trapped in its long folds. Ashok sees Radha burning, turns to his mother Biji, and carries her out of the house, leaving Radha to her fate. She does escape, however, and the final scene of the film shows a bedraggled but uninjured Radha reuniting with Sita in a local shrine.

Love hidden from disapproving families, lovers separated and then reunited, and characters transformed by love are all typical fare in Indian films, and *Fire* employs many of these conventions.<sup>4</sup> Yet *Fire* is more than just a story of forbidden love—it is an allegory that uses romance to intervene in a national crisis. In other words, *Fire* is one of a number of national romances that have been popular in Indian cinema in recent years. Some of these movies, like Vidhu Chopra's *1942: A Love Story* (1993), come out of the Bombay industry, while others are from various regional cinemas such as Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995) or the world of Indian parallel cinema, for example, Aparna Sen's *Mr and Mrs Iyer* (2002).<sup>5</sup> As different as these films are, they all choose to narrate the national crisis they depict through a love story. Even the hugely popular, Academy-Award-nominated *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (2001) interweaves its story of a hapless cricket team with a national romance.<sup>6</sup> Unlike *Lagaan*, however, which tells a story of anti-colonial struggle in the 1890s, most of these films use the national romance to critique the communalism that has wrought such havoc on contemporary India. By portraying a couple who represents the union of groups in conflict, a film like *Bombay* creates an image that can stand in opposition to the divisive rhetoric spewed by fundamentalists. Romantic love becomes the vehicle these films use to advocate the

secular ideology that India was founded on yet which has often seemed in jeopardy in recent years.

Although India was founded as a secular state, communal divides have troubled the nation from its inception. During the Partition of Pakistan from India in 1947, hundreds of thousands were raped, abducted, and murdered as Muslims fled India and Hindus left what had become Pakistan, and millions who survived the violence were uprooted and left homeless. The migration and the violence that accompanied Partition created a legacy that many believe the subcontinent has not recovered from. In the more than fifty years since Partition, incidents of communal violence have occurred sporadically across India. Much of this violence can be traced to the rise of right-wing Hindu groups, such as the Shiv Sena, in the 1980s. These groups oppose secularism and believe that religious minorities are receiving undeserved special rights from the government. In place of current government policies, they advocate a Hindutva agenda, the belief that India should be united as a Hindu nation. Despite what their methods might indicate, these are not fringe groups but instead major political players. The electoral successes of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a group that advocates Hindu fundamentalism and aligns itself with the Shiv Sena, in the 1990s signaled the weakening influence of secularism in the Indian political arena, although recent elections suggest the trend may be reversing.<sup>7</sup>

*Fire* addresses the rise of communalism and the often tenuous position of secularism in India, but it does not tell its story as a romance between a Hindu and a Muslim. Instead, it creates a union between two Hindu women from similar backgrounds. By depicting a romance between two Hindu women the film automatically disrupts

Hindu fundamentalist narratives, narratives that see women solely as reproducers of the nation and bearers of tradition. Moreover, same-sex desire between women introduces the taint of racial and ethnic contamination, as the language the Shiv Sena used while protesting the film reveals. According to this rhetoric, desire between Radha and Sita infects the Hindu household, and by extension the Hindu nation. Thus, there is no need for *Fire* to include a character who is a racial, ethnic, or religious other; the specter of the other is present throughout the film as I will demonstrate in this chapter. By avoiding the presence of the ethnic or religious other, *Fire* is able to concentrate its criticism on the majority community, and as it does so, it creates a powerful critique of Hindu fundamentalism that avoids the difficulties that come with depicting communal violence and apportioning blame.

For fundamentalists, the link between ethnic others and same-sex desire is clear. When asked what he would do if the censor board allowed *Fire* to be re-released, Bal Thackeray, leader of the Shiv Sena, asserted:

If they pass the film as it is then I'll invite the Pakistani cricket team to come and play here. I'll welcome the extremists from Pakistan. I'll ask the Bangladesh government to send more and more Muslims to our country as there is enough barren land here. If needed we will vacate our houses for them in the interest of the nation. If you don't have that much respect for the nation then I'll allow this nation to go to the dogs.<sup>8</sup>

Thackeray's equation of art depicting same-sex desire and Muslim "extremists" makes clear that queers' status is outside the Hindu nation the Shiv Sena constructs through its discourse. Allowing representations of queer women to circulate is akin to disrespecting the nation and, in Thackeray's eyes, will lead to total chaos. The boundaries of the nation, for fundamentalist movements like the Shiv Sena, must keep out many kinds of threats, from the Pakistani cricket team to "contagious" lesbianism. They define the nation by

policing its boundaries and allowing inside only proper national subjects, which are necessarily Hindu and heterosexual. Furthermore, Thackeray's comments and the various reactions *Fire* generated reveal how representations of women and female sexuality are particularly charged sites within which to discuss the nation. Indeed, the film *Bombay Boys* (1998) which depicts male same-sex desire caused comparatively little controversy upon its release in India.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, *Girlfriend* (2004), a recent film about two women who are lovers, has raised fundamentalist ire yet again. The Sena attacked theaters showing the film, burning effigies of the director and halting screenings.<sup>10</sup>

It was inevitable that *Fire* would generate some controversy because of its depiction of a same-sex relationship and its defense of female desire; however, naming the main characters "Radha" and "Sita" intensified responses to the film. In fact, a substitution of the name "Nita" for "Sita" was the one change the Indian Film Censor Board required before the Hindi version of *Fire* was released. (The English language version of the film was allowed to keep the names Radha and Sita.)<sup>11</sup> Radha and Sita are the two main female characters in Hindu mythology and Sita in particular represents the ideal Indian woman for many Hindus. The long-suffering wife of Ram, hero of the epic the *Ramayana*, Sita is pure, chaste, and loyal. Radha, consort of the god Krishna, is a slightly less charged but equally significant mythic figure; Radha and Krishna represent perfect and transcendent, albeit extra-marital, love. Naming the characters in the film after figures who exemplify the ideals of Hindu womanhood and then depicting them as lovers overtly challenges Hindu fundamentalism. Moreover, using the names Radha and Sita also ensured that the characters would be read as symbols for the nation.

Hindu fundamentalists advocate a return to a *Ram Rajya* (a kingdom of Ram), an idealized community based on the mythic Ram's rule that will correct what they see as the problems of the recent past:

Hindu nationalists allege that the Hindu/Indian nation has been weakened by Islamic influence, Westernization, the policies of secularist national leaders such as Nehru, and, above all, by a failure to recognize the Hindutva "uniting" the "diversity" of Indian culture.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, this *Ram Rajya* is a Hindu nation and one that adheres to fundamentalist principles adapted from the *Ramayana*. Thus, the *Ramayana* plays a central role in Hindu fundamentalists' understandings of the nation and is also a vehicle to galvanize public opinion in support of their agenda. At times fundamentalists use the epic to incite communalism and, in fact, the televised *Ramayana* that aired in 1987 did just that.<sup>13</sup>

When *Fire* rewrites this central text it challenges the basis of fundamentalist imaginings of India and offers a powerful critique of communalism. I argue that *Fire* advocates the replacement of communal rhetoric with a liberal discourse of love and a message of tolerant secularism represented by romantic union. Instead of a nation modeled on the rule of Ram and embodied by an idealized relationship between Ram and Sita, *Fire* presents us with the image of Radha and Sita as an allegory for a secular India.<sup>14</sup>

*Fire*'s strongest critique of Hindu fundamentalism occurs when it rewrites Sita's trial by fire, an episode from the *Ramayana*. The trial by fire is a test of purity that Ram asks Sita to endure after she has returned from being held captive by the evil king Ravana of Lanka. Sita agrees and walks through fire as a means of proving her purity and, although she emerges unscathed, Ram sends her into exile anyway. A pervasive motif in Indian literature, film, and popular culture, the trial by fire demonstrates the paramount importance of honor and sexual purity for Hindu women. Mehta re-imagines the trial by



fire in the image of Radha burning that occurs in the film's climactic scene, using cinematography and editing to position audiences to identify with Radha's point of view rather than Ashok's. Furthermore, she allows this "Sita" to defend her desires and condemn her accuser. By re-imagining the mythic Sita's trial by fire, the film asks audiences to contest a vision of the nation that relies on policing women's purity and keeping out cultural others and replace it with an image of a secular, inclusive India.

In this chapter, I argue that the controversy over *Fire* is not an isolated incident of nationalist homophobia, but instead part of the larger fundamentalist project that depends on disciplining some national subjects and expelling others. As I will demonstrate, Hindu fundamentalism is inexorably linked to upholding communal divides and othering Muslims. Although *Fire* does not include any significant Muslim characters nor explicitly refer to communalism, it alludes to Muslim identities and communal violence in a number of ways. For instance, the inclusion of Julie, Jatin's Chinese-Indian girlfriend, allows the film to raise the issue of racism against minorities in India. Furthermore, although few Muslim characters appear in the film, at key moments Radha and Sita escape the household and visit Muslim shrines and temples. In fact, *Fire* closes with the image of Radha and Sita reunited in the shrine of Nizamuddin, a Sufi Muslim poet who preached love and the unity of all things. In the film's final frame, Radha and Sita have left their home and family and are positioned outside of one particular nationalist construction of India, a construction which can only see women as heterosexual and the literal and cultural reproducers of a Hindu nation. This final image of the women reunited, literally outside of home, family, and (in a sense) nation demonstrates *Fire's* use

of Muslim spaces as a means of imagining a way out of fundamentalist constructs of the nation.

While many critics have pointed out how *Fire*'s reception reveals much about the Hindutva agenda of the fundamentalists and their use of women as symbols for the nation, no one has traced the critique of fundamentalism embedded in the film itself in the haunting figure of the Hindu-Muslim union that is visible—and, in fact, audible—throughout. For instance, two of the songs in *Fire* come from the *Bombay* soundtrack and reference that film's allegory of an inclusive, secular India embodied in the union of a Hindu man, his Muslim wife, and their children. In contrast to other critics who focus only on *Fire*'s reception, I read scenes such as the ones featuring the *Bombay* score in order to show how a number of interrelated fundamentalist debates are alluded to in the text itself. I argue that the Hindu-Muslim union haunts *Fire*, appearing in traces such as the use of the *Bombay* soundtrack, thus associating Radha and Sita's relationship with inter-communal unions as a means of making a plea for a secular India free from communalism.

In this chapter, I would like to use the poster campaign I described earlier as a model and tease out the links *Fire* suggests exist between communal violence and the policing of sexuality. I start with an overview of *Fire*'s production, its reception globally, and critical scholarship on the film. After explaining how my methodology differs from that of previous critics, I move on to an examination of the recurring motif of the trial by fire. I read three different versions of the trial and end with an exploration of the film's climax in the scene where Radha's sari catches fire. In the chapter's second half, I shift to an analysis of the film's Muslim subtext. I begin by discussing *Bombay* and deciphering

what it means that *Fire* references that film in its climactic moment. I continue with a brief look at the film's inclusion of a minority critique voiced by Julie's father and explain why Mehta used a Chinese-Indian character rather than a Muslim voice to raise this issue. Finally, I look the film's use of Muslim spaces by reading two key scenes set in a temple and a shrine respectively.

### **Theaters on Fire: Diasporic Reception**

All of the texts I look at in this dissertation are watershed moments in terms of queer postcolonial representation and, as such, they respond to and, at times, produce national crises. Yet perhaps no other text I examine has engendered as much controversy as *Fire* or spawned as much debate about who counts as a legitimate national subject. While Hindu fundamentalists denounced the film as an affront to Indian values and claimed the women it depicted were not proper national subjects, liberals, feminists, and free speech advocates defended the film, claiming it was not about lesbianism at all but instead about women's choices. Supporters and detractors of the film were both advancing definitions of the Indian woman; while some of these definitions allowed for liberal challenges to patriarchy, most ignored same-sex desire. *Fire* continued to provoke debates about citizenship, belonging, and national identity as it traveled outside of India, where some audiences read the film as proof of what they perceived as India's inherent backwardness. What follows is a brief summary of *Fire*'s production history, its by-now-familiar reception, and scholarship on the film.

Deepa Mehta was born in Amritsar and educated in New Delhi, but now lives in Canada. She writes as well as directs most of her films including those in the trilogy

made up of *Earth* (1998), *Fire*, and the soon-to-be-released *Water* (2005).<sup>15</sup> Each film in the trilogy is set in a different time and place, but they are linked by their goal of chronicling women's lives in twentieth-century India.<sup>16</sup> Told through the eyes of a young Parsi girl in Lahore who witnesses the violence of Partition and based on the novel *Cracking India* by Bapsi Sidwa, *Earth* documents the particular violence women were subjected to in the communal riots that accompanied the division of India and Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> *Water*, the third film in the trilogy, narrates the plight of a group of widows forced into poverty in the holy city of Varanasi in the 1930s and includes the story of one widow who engages in an inter-caste relationship.<sup>18</sup> *Fire*, the only film in the trilogy set in contemporary India, continues Mehta's investigation into the lives of women and the policing of women's desires, but shifts the focus to the institution of marriage and same-sex love.

Financed by both North American and Indian investors, *Fire* premiered at the Toronto Film Festival and showed in festivals throughout Canada, the United States, Europe, and India for two years before its general release in India. In addition to garnering excellent reviews, *Fire* won fourteen prizes including the L.A. Outfest Award for Outstanding Narrative Feature and the Award for Most Popular Canadian Film at the Vancouver International Film Festival.<sup>19</sup> In November of 1998 the Indian Censor Board of Film Certification awarded *Fire* an Adult certificate (similar to an R rating in the United States) and the film played throughout India without incident to 80-90 percent full houses for three weeks. Then, in December of 1998—three weeks after *Fire*'s release in India—the Shiv Sena requested that the Minister of Culture in Maharashtra ban the film. Dissatisfied with the slowness of the government's response, the Shiv Sena and their

women's group, the Mahila Aghadi, attacked theaters across the India where the film was being shown. Theaters in Mumbai, Delhi, Surat, and Calcutta were stormed by mobs that ranged in size from a dozen participants to over two hundred. Although no one was hurt in these attacks, the protestors ripped down or burnt posters, broke windows, and damaged property. Moreover, the attacks succeeded in instilling fear in theater owners and audiences, and many theaters stopped screening the film for fear of violence.<sup>20</sup> These protests continued sporadically throughout December and, eventually, the film was returned to the Censor Board, an act warranted only in the face of a "public outrage." (Some asked if one group's disapproval constituted public outrage.) For the second time the Censor Board approved the film, and on February 26, 1999, it was re-released throughout India. The only change made in the film was in Maharashtra, a Shiv Sena stronghold, where the names of both heroines were left out of the film in response to demands.<sup>21</sup> The Shiv Sena stopped protesting the film which closed the following month due to low turnout and continued fears among theater owners. Despite the very public nature of the attacks, few perpetrators were arrested, leading some critics to charge that the government condoned the Sena's tactics and approved their goals.

In fact, the Shiv Sena received explicit support from various members of the BJP government which was in power at the time. For example, then-Chief Minister Manohar Joshi said, "I congratulate them for what they have done. The film's theme is alien to our culture."<sup>22</sup> Asserting that same-sex desire is a Western import is a familiar tactic in nationalist rhetoric; the Shiv Sena was able to exploit this common perception. Bal Thackeray questioned the "fairness" of showing such things "which are not a part of Indian culture," and went on to express the fear that "tomorrow it might start in all ladies'

hostels.”<sup>23</sup> He further argued, “In the name of art and progressive intellectualism you can’t manipulate public medium and corrupt tender minds.”<sup>24</sup> Women’s “tender” minds, in particular, must be protected from these dangerous and contagious ideas. This idea of lesbianism as a contagious, Western disease (which Thackeray likens to a kind of “social AIDS”) is also prevalent in much nationalist discourse and is one of the misconceptions that negatively impacts South Asian queers. Queerness has no place in the nation, according to this logic, and therefore must be seen as alien and foreign. To be sure, same-sex desire has a long history in India. In fact, it is more accurate to credit the British with creating legislation against sodomy than to accuse them of bringing homosexuality to India.<sup>25</sup>

As is often the case when politicians invoke moral values, the Shiv Sena’s attack on *Fire* was motivated more by politics than by religion. The Sena attempted to use *Fire* to drum up the Hindutva sentiment that the BJP government was moving away from. Moreover, they were trying to recruit new members and cover up recent embarrassments such as Thackeray’s failed attempt to get Pakistani cricketers banned from India, a request then-Prime Minister Atal Bhari Vajpayee rejected. The Shiv Sena has had a successful record of gaining popularity through enflaming bigotry—for instance, Thackeray has praised Hitler and railed against Muslims, Sikhs and Christians—and long before the controversy over *Fire* the Sena’s rhetoric had led to violence. A judicial inquiry named Thackeray a provocateur of the mobs that killed 1,200 people, most of whom were Muslims, during rioting in Mumbai in 1992 and 1993.<sup>26</sup> The campaign against *Fire* was clearly politically-motivated and consisted of familiar Sena tactics such

as inciting crowds to violence, attacking cultural productions, scapegoating minorities, and policing representations of sexuality.

Many artists and filmmakers spoke out against the Shiv Sena's violent attempt at censorship. One group filed a petition with the Supreme Court "seeking a directive to restore the rule of law and the Constitution before the situation slips into complete anarchy."<sup>27</sup> They claimed that the state government in Maharashtra, chief Minister Manohar Joshi, and Bal Thackeray had violated the constitution and demanded that those guilty of disrupting the film be charged. In addition, counter-protests were organized and various groups came together to demand that the film be screened. Feminists, artists, organizations for the protection of civil liberties, and gay and lesbian activists united in support of *Fire*.

Some of those who demonstrated in support of *Fire*, however, asserted that the film is not, as the Shiv Sena claimed, about lesbianism.<sup>28</sup> Mehta herself is part of this group who argued for a "universal" reading of the film: "It is not about lesbianism. It's about loneliness, about choices."<sup>29</sup> Although this liberal humanist response supports *Fire*'s release, its erasure of the text's queerness obscures the existence of Indian queers and misses an opportunity to highlight their struggles. According to this line of reasoning, queerness can stand as a symbol of opposition to patriarchy—an example of women rejecting inattentive husbands, for instance—but cannot be a legitimate identity or set of practices on its own. Even though they opposed the Sena's violent attempt at censorship, this coalition of liberals, artists, and feminists were also defining lesbians as outsiders to the nation.

Perhaps more problematic, however, is *Fire*'s reception by some critics (and one can assume audiences) outside of India. As Gayatri Gopinath, Ruth Vanita, and Jigna Desai have pointed out, reviewers like Roger Ebert used the film to support their perceptions that India is backward and to hold up, in contrast, the modern individual as a Western construct.<sup>30</sup> In his review of *Fire* Ebert wrote, "Lesbianism is so outside the experience of these Hindus, we learn, that their language even lacks a word for it."<sup>31</sup> According to this logic, having a word for lesbianism here becomes a marker of progress and an index of development. Although some scholars blame critics' racism for readings such as Ebert's, Ruth Vanita faults Mehta for making this line of reasoning so available in the film. She argues that *Fire* gives a one-sided representation of Hinduism and critiques the same line of dialogue Ebert refers to:

At a critical moment in Deepa Mehta's film *Fire*, Sita remarks to her lover Radha, "There is no word in our language to describe what we are or how we feel for each other." To which language does she refer—Punjabi, some variant of Hindi, Urdu, or, more likely, some combination of all three? We do not know because on screen the characters speak English. In this metonymic moment, two things happen: English is disowned as "our language" (even though Indians have been speaking English for two hundred years) and "our language" is framed as a catch-all unnamed Indian language that lacks any word for same-sex identities or relationships.<sup>32</sup>

In scenes like the one Vanita describes, the film is available to readings that construct India as the backward East that is the Other of Western progress. Discussions of the film must therefore challenge not only the homophobic nationalism of the Shiv Sena, but also the liberal erasure of queerness and Eurocentric readings like Ebert's. By making other readings of *Fire* available, I open up the text for more productive interventions.

Other reactions to the film, both in India and throughout the diaspora, have been more promising as they take the opportunity occasioned by the controversy around *Fire*



to speak out about queer sexuality in India and challenge the construction of the nation as heterosexual. Lesbian groups in India, for instance, used the film as a vehicle through which to proclaim their existence and the media took note: “India’s lesbians have been emerging, grasping the opportunity to show India that they exist, that they do not have fangs and talons, that they are Indian, too; and moreover that India has always had homosexuals, and that ancient Indian culture acknowledged and honoured them.”<sup>33</sup> A coalition of organizations came together to form the Campaign for Lesbian Rights in Delhi, while groups around the world protested the censorship of *Fire*.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps most productive of all the responses to the controversy were the groups making explicit connections between various forms of violence and exclusion that happen in the name of the nation. Shortly after the protests against *Fire* began, activists in Mumbai distributed the posters I quoted in the opening of this chapter which ask, “Can Mumbai merely look on when rights and freedoms are throttled? Should Mumbai be a mute spectator?”<sup>35</sup> By linking various acts of violence and bigotry done in the name of a Hindu nation these posters expose relationships between exclusions based on ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality.

Evidently, *Fire* is a film that can be read in many ways and used in the service of various discourses: to assert the heterosexuality of a particular construct of the nation or to challenge that construct, to represent a specifically South Asian queer sexuality, or to posit queerness as a Western phenomenon. As this snapshot of various groups’ reactions to the film illustrates: “*Fire*, then, gains multiple and contradictory meanings as it circulates within India, within the South Asian diaspora, and within film festival circuits

and theaters in Europe and North America.”<sup>36</sup> Sujata Moorti makes a similar point and cautions critics as she asserts that there are

difficulties involved in transporting meaning across cultural borders. Even as cross-border flows have facilitated the movement of media products, I argue that understandings of cultural artifacts are embedded in specific places and locations. . . . The ways in which we understand cultural products are deeply rooted in the historical conditions that mark the locus of spectatorship and are not free-floating. Meanings are anchored to the site of reading and I argue that global products are read still in the vernacular.<sup>37</sup>

Most critics seem to agree with Gopinath and Moorti and the great majority of scholarship on the film focuses on *Fire*'s reception and analyzes local reactions to the film. Critics have examined attacks by right-wing Hindu fundamentalists, support from the Indian left, and the reaction of Western audiences represented by critics from the United States and Canada. This attention to local responses and careful reading of the rhetoric of the controversy has produced a rich record of the discourses the film has engendered, but what of the film itself?

While all of my texts have been discussed at length by scholars, audiences, and the popular press, only *The Crying Game* has received a similar degree of scrutiny as *Fire*. Despite the quantity of criticism, however, very few critics say much about the film itself. Some who do look beyond the reception provide interesting contexts for the film; for example, Moorti explores how *Fire* employs conventions from both Bollywood and Indian alternative cinema, while Jigna Desai contextualizes *Fire* by placing it alongside other films by South Asian diasporic filmmakers such as Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1992) and Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993).<sup>38</sup> These interventions help us situate *Fire* in relation to other cinematic traditions and identify the conventions it borrows, but they do not advance readings of the text itself. Rather than looking at *Fire*

alongside other films, Gopinath situates it within queer Indian and South Asian diasporic literary texts such as *Funny Boy* and Ismat Chughtai's short story "The Quilt," enabling us to see the ways in which all of these texts challenge Western models of gay identity and form a body of work that asserts a specifically South Asian queer identity.<sup>39</sup> Yet although she mentions particular scenes from *Fire*, Gopinath too refrains from reading the film. In fact, no critic does more than briefly note scenes as a way of illustrating issues that the film raises. Though my reading of *Fire* is enriched by Gopinath and Moorti's work, it goes beyond the contexts these critics provide and looks to the text of the film itself. In my analysis of *Fire*, I read particular scenes in the film to see what they can tell us about the film's critique of fundamentalism and its advocacy of a secular nation embodied in the union between Radha and Sita.

### **The Ramayana Re-imagined**

The seven books that make up the *Ramayana* were originally written in Sanskrit, allegedly by the sage Valmiki, somewhere between 500 B.C. and A.D. 200. The epic chronicles the life of Ram, an incarnation of the god Vishnu who decides to be reborn so he can kill Ravana, the king of Lanka, who has been harassing the gods. Born the son of a king in northern India, Ram faces many tests as he grows up. He wanders the forest for years with a sage, kills a wicked demoness, and wins his wife Sita in a contest where he is the only one able to fire a divine bow. Soon after this episode, Ram is exiled from his father's kingdom because one of his father's wives tricks the king into allowing her son to rule. Ram obeys his father and roams the forest with Sita and his brother Lakshman for fourteen years. While they live in the forest, Sita is abducted by Ravana and held captive

in his palace. A great battle ensues and Ram eventually kills Ravana and rescues Sita. When she returns, however, Ram doubts her fidelity. Sita walks through a burning pyre to prove her chastity and emerges unharmed. But gossip about Sita continues, so Ram does what he sees as his duty and exiles her. In the forest, Sita gives birth to Ram's twin sons. One day the boys appear at court and Ram realizes Sita was true to him but it is too late. Sita has prayed for the earth to swallow her up and it does. Ram gives his kingdom to his sons and then steps into the river to merge with Vishnu.<sup>40</sup>

The story of Sita's trial by fire, or *agni pariksha*, is the motif that structures *Fire* and the film makes no secret of its preoccupation: it names one character Sita and incorporates performances of the story in three separate scenes. Moreover, these repeated invocations foreshadow the climax of the film when Radha's husband confronts her about her infidelity and abandons her as her sari catches fire. Although it is Radha and not Sita who goes through the trial here, these repeated re-stagings of the *agni pariksha* make visible the film's intention to intervene in discourses of women's purity by taking on this influential myth. *Fire* asks viewers to consider the impact Sita's story has on Indian culture in general and on women's lives in particular. In what follows, I compare *Fire*'s different repetitions of the trial by fire, looking first at scenes that cite the televised *Ramayana*, at a live performance the film incorporates, and, finally, at the scene that depicts Radha's trial by fire.

*Fire* chooses to critique both a particular version of the *Ramayana* and certain aspects inherent in the epic that make it hostile to women. Purnima Mankekar argues that the *Ramayana* serial that was televised in 1987 on India's state-run network creates the desire in many Hindu viewers for a traditional *Ram Rajya*, a desire which needs to be interrogated by feminists: Feminist analyses of texts such as the *Ramayan* that invoke a utopian Hindu community foreclose an uncritical celebration of "the traditional community" and

compel us to acknowledge that communities are sometimes based on practices of violence and exclusion towards women and cultural Others.<sup>41</sup>

By reproducing existing inequalities, Mankekar argues, the *Ramayana* casts them as inevitable and, in fact, divine. She claims that these inequalities, in particular gender inequalities, are central to the construction of Hindu nationalism; or, to put it another way, “Hindu nationalism and discourses of sexuality” are “co-implicated.”<sup>42</sup> Figures like the lustful Ravana who kidnaps Sita and embodies a threat to Hindu women are thus intrinsic to Hindu nationalism, not just a by-product of it. Not only are Hindu women policed by threats of tests of their purity—however metaphorical these tests may be—these same stories construct “others” whom the women must be protected from.

The political significance of representations of demonized Others who steal or dishonor “our” women becomes clearer when we place them in the context of contemporary communal discourses on sexuality, according to which women have to be protected from the Other because their sexuality is a site for contests over the honor of communities.<sup>43</sup>

The connections between women’s purity and community honor are not hidden or subtle; fundamentalists make the threat posed by those they construct as others quite explicit. Thackeray constantly “ridicules Congress and intellectuals as effeminate, demonizes myths of Muslim potency, and challenges young Hindu men to ‘stand on their own two feet.’”<sup>44</sup> According to Thomas Hansen who studies the Shiv Sena and their rhetoric,

Sexual undercurrents are noticeable in Thackeray’s attacks on Muslims. It is the Muslims, after all, who obviously are the obstacles to a full and proud Hindu masculinity. . . . The remedy Thackeray prescribes is to recover Hindu aggressiveness, restore the martial spirit of Marathas.<sup>45</sup>

Fundamentalists like Thackeray seek to create a *Ram Rajya* that depends in large part on a particular set of gender dynamics: Hindu women who must be protected from sexual predators/cultural others by virile, masculine Hindu warriors. Some versions of the

*Ramayana*, such as the televised serial, adhere to this gendered construction while others contest it.

Doordarshan, India's only state-run television network, introduced its influential National Programme in 1982. Since its inception, this popular two-hour mix of news and entertainment has sought to project the image of a unified, modern India across the country. According to Mankekar: "The explicit objective of the National Programme was to forge a modern, national culture through television dissemination of discourses of development and national integration."<sup>46</sup> Constructing a national culture inevitably involves legitimizing some subjects while marking others as belonging outside the nation. In the case of the National Programme, Mankekar argues, "The communalization of nationalism seeped into Doordarshan's construction of 'the Indian past' and its representation of national culture in terms of monolithic (and normative) Hindu identity."<sup>47</sup> One text has been particularly effective at harnessing "the Indian past" in order to create a Hindu national identity that stands for all of India: the *Ramayana*.

The first episode of the Doordarshan *Ramayana* aired on the National Programme on January 25, 1987. Made up of seventy-eight weekly episodes, the serial was an enormous popular success and reached an estimated 80-100 million viewers.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, it continues to circulate globally on video and has been broadcast in countries around the world including Mauritius, Trinidad, and the United Kingdom.<sup>49</sup> The serial created such a phenomenon in India that when it aired many shops were closed, streets were deserted, and televisions were set up in public spaces so even those who did not own one could watch. Anecdotal accounts describe families gathering together to watch the serial in

much the same way they would to worship.<sup>50</sup> What image of the nation did this wildly popular serial project? What ideological work was it doing?

Many critics argue that the Doordarshan *Ramayana* exacerbated already fraught communal relations and furthered the growth of Hindu fundamentalism.<sup>51</sup> While there is no simple causal relationship between the *Ramayana* and communal violence, Mankekar raises an important point when she asks, “What were the politics of telecasting a Hindu epic on state-run television at a time when religious tensions were at an all-time high?”<sup>52</sup> Perhaps even more significant, this particular version of the *Ramayana* has been critiqued for telling its story in ways that encourage communalism. Many different versions of the epic exist and in every re-telling choices are made about what to incorporate. Ramanand Sagar and the other creators of the Doordarshan *Ramayana* adopted a number of conventions that furthered communalist sentiment. In his study of religious nationalism in India, Peter Van der Veer argues that the televised *Ramayana*

has done more than anything else to make a standard version of the epic known and popular among the Indian middle class. Moreover, it greatly enhanced the general public’s knowledge of Ayodhya as Rama’s birthplace and therefore one of the most important places of pilgrimage in Uttar Pradesh. In this way the controversy concerning the mosque built ‘on Rama’s birthplace’ has become an issue that is highly loaded with affect in the popular imagination.<sup>53</sup>

In fact, three years after Doordarshan aired the *Ramayana* Hindu fundamentalists destroyed the Barbari mosque in Ayodhya, claiming that it was built on the site where Ram was born. According to these accounts—which have little archaeological support—one of Babar’s generals had razed the temple marking the site to build the mosque in 1528.

The mosque remained a contested symbol throughout the twentieth century, but the situation only came to a head in the 1980s when the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP)

began to stage pilgrimages to the site. In 1989 they began a campaign that assembled “sacred” bricks from villages across India to be brought in ritual processions to the mosque with the intent of building a Hindu temple on the site where the mosque stood. The national government as well as various local governments attempted to stop these processions before they reached the mosque but they only succeeded in temporarily halting their plans. On December 6, 1992, the VHP and the BJP held a joint rally that turned into a mass demolition of the mosque. The national government responded swiftly, banning the groups involved, dismissing several regional BJP governments, and stating their goal of rebuilding the mosque. Regardless of these actions, however, communal violence swept India. In Mumbai, more than a thousand people, most of them Muslims, were murdered by mobs led by the Shiv Sena. Mobs also rioted in Delhi, Surat, Calcutta, and Ahmedabad. Van der Veer disputes the claim that passionate religious feelings and violent action like that which occurred in the riots are “natural” and argues instead that “although passions are certainly involved, their very ‘naturalness’ is produced by a political process.”<sup>54</sup> It is the VHP’s *manipulation* of the mosque that was able to turn it into a “symbol of the ‘threatened’ Hindu majority” and the Doordarshan *Ramayana* helped disseminate the narrative that made that possible.

The Doordarshan *Ramayana* did more to further communal tensions than encouraging audiences to see the mosque as a desecration of Hindu sacred space; it also promoted an image of Muslim men as aggressive and predatory. In fact, regardless of the version of the story that is told, the *Ramayana* lends itself easily to communalism because it invariably creates an evil other in opposition to the righteous Ram:

Any revival of the myth requires the construction of a divine/demonic antithesis. Since Rama occupies the first slot, it becomes necessary to ‘*rakshasize*’<sup>55</sup> the



Other. Since this Other has, from the twelfth century onward been the Muslim invaders of India, the Rama narrative comes with a coded demonic Other...The political imaginary of the Hindu must create the Muslim demon the moment it hoists its ideals onto the Rama narrative.<sup>56</sup>

The racial and cultural othering that the epic encourages is explicitly linked to gender and sexuality in the figure of Sita. After she is held captive by Ravana, her purity has been threatened by the cultural other/sexual predator who, in the fundamentalist imagination, connotes the Muslim man. This stereotype invariably contributed to a climate in which Muslims could be attacked by Hindu mobs who saw themselves as righteous warriors. The mythic Sita and her suspected impurity raises the specter of besmirched community honor which justifies this violence.

The first time *Fire* incorporates the Doordarshan *Ramayana*, Radha tells Mundu to take Biji upstairs to watch the serial. Instead he borrows a pornographic video from Jatin's secret collection and forces Biji to watch it with him while he masturbates. Apparently he has done this before, but because Biji has suffered a debilitating stroke she cannot tell anyone. Yet while Mundu's actions are clearly abusive and take advantage of Biji's incapacitated state, the film plays the scene, in part, for comic value. Mundu's masturbation, then, functions in a number of ways in the scene as it raises questions about pleasure, selfishness, and duty. The scene marks him as deviant, a state it associates with his lower-class status, and creates a comic portrayal of the two-faced and lascivious servant. At the same time, the scene places Mundu's actions within the spectrum of non-reproductive sexuality in the household. Radha is infertile and Ashok has taken a vow of celibacy; Jatin's relationship with Julie is extra-marital and non-reproductive; Jatin and Sita have no sexual relationship to speak of; and Radha and Sita's relationship is same-sex. The film compares these various states and acts and asks audiences to consider their

meanings and impact. When is prioritizing your own pleasure over your obligations to others wrong, the film asks, and when is it justified? Although Mundu's behavior falls along this spectrum, unlike the other relationships in the film his actions towards Biji are coercive and not consensual.

The significant part of the scene, for my purposes, begins outside the apartment with a medium shot of Sita opening the front door. Sita enters and the camera cuts to Mundu rushing to sit down and attempting to look nonchalant; however, he is breathing heavily and appears nervous. Sita walks over to the couch where Biji sits, visibly upset. A medium shot shows Mundu seated alone facing the camera as he begins to describe what the heroine Sita is going through in the video. The camera cuts between Sita comforting Biji and Mundu describing the trial by fire and asserting that Biji is upset because the story is so emotional. He claims that she cries every time they watch this scene and confesses, "Madam, even I have cried." In the final shot of the scene, the television screen over Mundu's shoulder displays the image of Sita facing the flames. The composition of the shot stays the same but the image on the television changes to a close-up of Sita followed by a close-up of Ram. A close-up of the video box of the *Ramayana* ends the scene and moves us from the apartment to the combination take-away restaurant and video store downstairs.

The scene I just described serves a number of purposes in the film. Along with raising questions about non-reproductive sexuality, pleasure, and consent, the scene introduces the theme of the trial by fire and allows Mundu to relate Sita's story to audiences unfamiliar with it. Mehta clearly wants to make the film accessible to many different audiences. In addition, the scene continues the film's strategy of

characterization by associating people with particular media genres. Biji is aligned with the *Ramayana* and religious films while Mundu is portrayed as a consumer of pornography, just as Sita has been linked to Bollywood romances and Jatin to Kung-fu films. This shorthand marks Biji as traditional, an association that is continued throughout the film and culminates in one of its final scenes when she spits on Radha, the daughter-in-law who has cared for her for thirteen years. In that moment, the film uses Biji to comment on a particularly repressive and intolerant version of tradition, a version it has earlier aligned with the televised *Ramayana*. Finally, although Mundu is lying about what has made Biji so upset—his abusive actions are to blame for her tears—his comments at least raise the possibility that Sita’s trial by fire produces intense emotions in its viewers.

The second appearance of the televised *Ramayana* occurs after Mundu has been caught watching pornography and masturbating in front of Biji. Ashok has taken Mundu to Swamiji who recommends the family forgive Mundu and give him another chance. In the next scene the family gathers in front of the television to watch the *Ramayana*. The characters’ awkward expressions hint that this is a mandatory activity, maybe even one prescribed by Swamiji. The scene opens with a grainy image of the television screen that fills the frame and shows Ram speaking in un-subtitled Hindi. The close-up of Ram shifts to a close-up of another man, perhaps Ram’s brother Lakshman who is one of those who argues that Sita’s purity must be tested. The camera leaves the television screen and cuts to a medium shot of Mundu squatting on the floor with his hands held under his chin. He faces forward and is shot from the side. The camera circles in front of him showing the entire family seated awkwardly behind him on the sofa. Everyone faces the television.

The placement of the characters reveals Mundu's tenuous and servile status in the household; while the family all sit uncomfortably close together on the couch, he is many feet in front of them on the floor. The shot frames a perfect tableau of an unhappy family forcibly grouped together in awkward discomfort. Mundu covertly glances back at the others as the dialogue from the television continues. Suddenly he turns and lunges towards Biji, touching her feet and begging her forgiveness. Although Radha and Jatin angrily reprimand Mundu, Ashok overrules them, counseling forgiveness as Swamiji has ordered. In the next shot, Mundu faces the camera and the television screen is visible over his shoulder while we hear Ashok lecturing about forgiveness. A grainy close-up of Sita fills the screen then cuts back to a shot of the family facing forward and Mundu kneeling before them. The scene ends with Mundu, the television screen again visible over his shoulder framing Sita and Ram. The flames flare up next to Sita as the scene closes.

Visually the scene illustrates both the family's awkwardness at being forced together and Mundu's tenuous place in the household, while thematically it makes a larger point about the televised *Ramayana* and its significance in contemporary Indian society. Showing the family gathered together watching the epic after a crisis of sorts emphasizes that the *Ramayana* was, for some, a religious rite and a means of worship. Along with emphasizing the story's importance in Indian culture, this scene also makes a point about sexual double standards. Mundu's desires and actions, however reviled they may be and however much they may damage Biji, deserve to be forgiven, yet no one questions why the mythic Sita must walk through the flames. The image of Mundu with Sita visible on the screen over his shoulder is a visual reminder asking us to consider how

differently female purity is regarded. Other versions of the epic that we see later in the film do, in fact, critique this double standard. A scene at Swamiji's ashram incorporates a live performance of the *Ramayana* and, unlike the Doordarshan version, this *Ramayana* allows Sita to question Ram. In addition, this repetition of the epic constantly exposes its status as a performance and draws attention to the audience's reaction to the story as a way of making us consider the impact the myth has on audiences.

The scene opens with a medium shot of a man dressed in a costume sitting and smoking in a doorway. He rises, puts out his cigarette, and walks through the door; in the next frame, we have entered the performance space with him. The camera slowly circles a stage and pans across an audience seated on the ground watching. Right from the start, then, we are made aware of the audience, indicating that their reactions will perhaps be important. Colored lights hanging in trees illuminate the area and slightly obstruct our view of both the stage and the audience. We are joining a performance already in progress. Before we see the performers, we hear them singing. Onstage a female figure slowly turning in circles becomes visible. The next frame is a medium shot of the audience showing men, women, and children all facing the stage. The camera does not focus on any single figure but instead frames groups. Rather than distinguishing between different individuals, in almost every shot of the audience we see people behaving similarly; they sway, clap to the music, and watch the stage avidly. At this point in the scene, we are not meant to notice individuals but to witness the group's reaction to the spectacle unfolding onstage.

In the next frame the camera focuses in on the performers. A medium shot shows a man costumed as Sita in a heavy green sari and gold jewelry who continues to dance

slowly in a circle.<sup>57</sup> The camera cuts to a medium shot of the figure next to Sita; his words and elaborate gold crown identify him as Ram. As the camera pans to the side and centers Ram and Sita in the frame, Sita sings, “My Lord Ram, what has your Sita done to deserve this?” She continues dancing as she asks, “Why are you testing my purity?” In this version of the *Ramayana*, then, Sita questions her fate and challenges Ram. In fact, the dialogue begins with her question. Texts of the *Ramayana* vary in the degree to which they idealize Ram. Some allow his actions to be scrutinized, while others reify him and leave no room for criticism. For instance, the Doordarshan *Ramayana*:

create[s] *relatively* few spaces for Hindu viewers, men or women, to criticize Ram’s treatment of Sita...Sagar was so determined to emphasize Sita’s [duties as a wife] (and at the same time absolve Ram of all blame) that, instead of having Ram banish her, he portrayed Sita as insisting on going into exile. He focused on “Sita’s choice” in leaving Ram.<sup>58</sup>

Mehta’s film thus provides us with contrasting versions of the epic, reminding us that the story exists in many adaptations and suggesting that we question other versions we may know. In the excerpts from the Doordarshan *Ramayana* we hear only from Ram and see iconic moments of the story—the image of flames, Sita’s face as she agrees to the trial—while in the live performance, Sita speaks and questions her treatment.

In the next few frames, shots of the performers onstage are intercut with shots of the audience watching the performance. This continual return to the audience has the effect of distancing us from the performance, reminding us that it is a performance, and suggesting that the audience is as much the subject of this scene as the play. A closer shot of Ram and Sita in the frame together follows. She dances as he speaks: “Sita I know that you are pure.” The camera cuts to a medium shot of Swamiji and Ashok in the audience facing the stage. Ashok glances at Swamiji and slaps a fly that has settled on his leg while

Ram sings, "But I have to do my duty and put you through the test of fire." The next frame is of Sita and Ram, and she replies, "My Lord, God Ram, your wish is my command." At this point, the camera follows two men as they walk backstage and carry out large, curved silhouettes made of wood with light bulbs behind them: the flames Sita will walk through. Like the actor we saw smoking in the first frame, seeing these men gathering props reinforces the artifice of what is taking place onstage. As they carry out the flames Sita sings, "I will gladly go through the trial by fire" while the camera pans back to Sita dancing and Ram watching her. The shot cuts to the audience and pans across them before settling on Ashok watching Swamiji who sways excitedly. In fact, the entire audience seems to be more and more animated as the climax of the episode nears. We cut back to a medium shot of Sita who begins to move sideways through the wooden flames with the camera following her. "I am pure and the fire will prove it," she repeats, adding, "Why do you doubt me my lord?" Again Sita questions Ram even as she acquiesces to his demands.

The next frame shows a close-up of a woman with a young girl asleep in her arms. As she watches the performance, a tear runs down her face and she wipes it with the back of her hand. Eventually she looks down at the ground, visibly moved. Her image encourages us to consider the impact Sita's story has on audiences, in particular on female members of the audience. A long shot follows of Ram standing with his hands on his hips watching his beloved wife walk through the flames follows. In contrast to the woman in the audience, Ram does not appear upset. Sita continues to sing as she moves through the flames: "Here I come o' fire, discerner of truth. You be my judge. If I have sinned turn me into ash." The camera follows her as she dances through the flames to the

other side of the stage where she bows at Ram's feet. The next shot is a close-up of Ram with Sita's face also visible in the frame but slightly obscured because of the angle. He sings, "Sita even the moon has flaws but you are flawless. And today, by being unscathed you triumphed in the trial by fire. But sadly I still have to send you into exile." Sita's head drops down and she exits the frame to the right as Ram continues singing: "So take away Sita and leave her in the forest." Her arm and bowed head briefly enter the frame and block our view of Ram while two men come forward to take her away. The final shot in the scene is of the audience. The camera pans from Ashok to Swamiji in a close-up; he grins enigmatically, his smile a contrast to the crying women's tears.

The contrast between the tear running down that woman's cheek and Swamiji's smile suggests that Sita's story may mean something very different for women than for men. *Fire* sets up this contrast to illustrate the story's affective power as well as to comment on how male religious authorities make use of the trial by fire. While Swamiji does not invoke Sita's story per se, he does stigmatize desire calling it the "root of all evil," and he advocates using women to "test" one's self control—something Gandhi also practiced. Thus, Swamiji constructs woman as a temptation who interferes with the spiritual path and Ashok follows his beliefs and practices. Jigna Desai reads *Fire* as a critique of two different forms of middle-class masculinity: nationalist Gandhian abstinence represented by Ashok and the cosmopolitan, bourgeois new man embodied by Jatin.<sup>59</sup> Ashok and, of course, Swamiji do function as symbols of Gandhian nationalism, as is evidenced by their celibacy, but Mehta is also using them to comment on the way many belief systems employ women for their own purposes. The *Ramayana*, Mehta reminds us, is easily harnessed by nationalists and fundamentalists of all kinds—at times



in the service of causes such as anti-colonialism, at others for a Hindutva agenda. Mehta, on the other hand, creates a revision of the trial by fire that is attuned to what she perceives as women's interests. It is to this scene that I turn next.

The scene depicting Radha's trial by fire occurs towards the end of *Fire* after Ashok has caught Radha and Sita in bed together. He storms off, confused and angry but also consumed by desire as he pictures what he has seen. Ashok has spent the past thirteen years following Swamiji's teachings and attempting to banish desire from his life so this failure is perhaps as painful to him as the knowledge that his wife has been unfaithful. In one particularly poignant moment, we see Ashok's face fill with shame as he becomes aroused while remembering the image of Radha and Sita having sex. Meanwhile, the women make plans to move out of the house together, but Radha insists that she must explain herself to Ashok before leaving. She tells Sita she will meet her later at the Nizamuddin shrine. Sita packs and leaves reluctantly while Radha waits for Ashok to return.

The next scene opens with Radha standing alone in the kitchen heating milk as she waits for Ashok. The camera pans upwards from the milk on the stove to a close-up of Radha looking down. The kitchen is drab and smoke stains coat the wall over the range; all the colors in the scene including the characters' costumes are shades of beige. In contrast to earlier scenes when Radha and Sita are together, there is no color or joy in the household now. Ashok enters the frame from the left so that it contains Radha's face in profile along with part of the back of Ashok's head and his shoulder. It is a slightly ominous image because he comes up quietly behind her and she is not aware of him. Ashok breaks the silence with a command: "Radha come to the bedroom." When she

becomes aware of his presence, Radha turns to face him. The camera remains positioned just behind Ashok's left shoulder and the composition of this shot is repeated with little variation throughout the scene. This over-the-shoulder shot is paired with close-ups of Ashok in a shot/reverse shot sequence. The close-ups of Ashok do not show any part of Radha in the frame which has the effect of aligning us with Radha's point of view and not Ashok's. We never see directly through Ashok's eyes because every shot of Radha contains part of the back of his head. We do, however, see from Radha's point of view as the direct shots of Ashok demonstrate.

Ashok continues to demand Radha's help, arguing that he must test himself to see if he can control his desire. Radha's face registers disbelief and then defiance; she refuses, turning back to the stove. He continues to implore and she continues to refuse. The next shot is a close-up of Ashok alone facing the camera and saying incredulously, "What do you mean no?," which is followed by the over-the-shoulder shot with Radha facing the camera and part of Ashok's head and shoulder in the frame. "It's your duty," he tells her. "I've finished with my penance Ashok, I'm leaving," she answers. His back fills the frame as he advances towards her ominously, but then, in a beautifully-choreographed movement, he moves to the right of the frame and we have the over-the-shoulder shot again but with Ashok on the other side of the frame. "Leaving?" he asks, turning to face the camera and calling out for Sita. Radha explains that she has left. In a close-up Ashok faces the camera and begins to lecture Radha about how "desire brings ruin." Cut back to the over-the-shoulder shot. "Does it Ashok?," Radha asks. She continues,

You know that without desire I was dead? Without desire there is no point in living. And you know what else? I desire to live. I desire Sita. I desire her warmth, her compassion, her body. I desire to live again.

In a close-up Ashok again faces the camera and calls Radha “shameless.” We see Radha’s shocked reaction in another over-the-shoulder shot and then the camera cuts quickly back to Ashok. Suddenly he grabs Radha and pulls her to him. It is a classic romantic shot with both of them in the frame in profile facing each other, yet he has grabbed her roughly and she is unwilling. The music, which has been building throughout the scene, swells as Ashok yells, “you want passion?” Drums begin to beat loudly and he kisses her violently but stops as suddenly as he began, pushing her away. Ashok holds Radha at arm’s length and asks, “What kind of woman are you?” The light of the stove illuminates them from below. We see Ashok’s back as he walks out of the kitchen.

A close-up of Radha’s distressed face fills the frame. The music swells to a crescendo and the camera cuts to a close-up of the stove. In the scuffle with Ashok, the end of Radha’s sari has fallen onto one of the burners and caught fire. Radha quickly jerks the fabric from the stove and throws it down. We see a close-up of the bottom half of the sari; flames ring its base. Next, a long shot of the kitchen doorway shows Radha with the bottom of her skirts in flames running out of the room. Ashok and Biji are visible just past Radha through the doorway in the living room. In a close-up we see Radha’s terrified face lit from below as she beats at her skirts to put out the flames. The next shot shows Ashok’s face in a close-up as he stares at Radha without moving. He has just realized what is happening to her and a series of emotions cross his face, finally settling into a kind of steely resignation. He looks down and out of the frame and up again towards Radha as if he is choosing between two options; then he bends down

taking Biji in his arms, and walks out of the frame and the apartment. The final shot in the scene is a medium close-up of Radha frantically beating at her skirts and trying to unwind the burning sari. The curtains in the kitchen doorway have caught fire and she is framed by flames. The screen fades to white.

The scene I describe above restages Sita's *agni pariksha* but with some significant differences. Thematically, it mirrors the *Ramayana* and tells the story of a wife confronted by her husband about suspected infidelity. In addition, the larger issues it raises about desire, purity, and the ideal woman are resonant with the *Ramayana*. On a visual level as well the scene refers to the *Ramayana*: like the mythic Sita, Radha is engulfed by flames while her husband looks on. And like Ram, rather than helping his wife Ashok sees the flames as a deserved trial and leaves her to her fate. Yet in contrast to the *Ramayana* where Sita's adultery is imagined, in this version the infidelity is decidedly real: Radha and Sita are lovers. Even more significant, in this retelling Radha defends her desires as legitimate, something the *Ramayana*'s Sita never does. Thus the story so frequently used to curtail women's desire is revised to defend this most shocking of infidelities. In fact, *Fire* recasts the mythic Sita's exile in the forest as Radha's escape to live with the woman she loves, transforming the tragic ending to a happy one. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, in this version the cinematography aligns us with Radha and not Ashok. The shots from Radha's point of view are followed by shots that cannot be from Ashok's point of view, effectively encouraging us to sympathize with Radha. We see what she sees; when he yells and accuses her, he accuses us. When her sari catches fire, we are still positioned to identify with Radha and feel her fear, and this encourages us to judge Ashok when he walks away. Through its cinematography and editing, then,

this revision asks audiences to take these new ways of reading the trial by fire and apply them to Ashok and, by implication, the *Ramayana*.

### ***Bombay is Burning: the Muslim Subtext Haunting Fire***

As I describe above, in *Fire*'s climactic scene Radha narrowly escapes burning to death while Ashok looks on without helping her. While the flames ring the bottom of her sari, non-diegetic music swells; drums beat in an ever-increasing tempo and a woman's voice wails dramatically. The score playing during this climactic scene comes from Mani Ratnam's *Bombay*. In fact, *Fire* borrows two songs from the *Bombay* soundtrack—the *Bombay* theme and *Ek Ho Gaye Hum Aur Tum*—and inserts them at a number of key moments in the film. *Fire* and *Bombay* share a composer, Bollywood superstar A.R. Rahman, but even so, why use music from another film?<sup>60</sup> And why choose music from this particular film—a romance between a Muslim woman and a Hindu man set against the backdrop of the communal riots that took place in 1993? I believe that *Fire* references the music from *Bombay* as a means of invoking the specter of communal violence, a subtext which haunts *Fire*. Below I sketch out the basic details of *Bombay* and give a brief reading of its narrative strategies, and then explain how *Fire* tells its story differently—most notably by creating a national romance that refutes fundamentalism and communal violence without also vilifying Muslims.

*Bombay* begins like a typical Bollywood romance and family melodrama, but as it progresses, it incorporates some conventions of realist social drama. The film opens with our hero, Shekhar, returning from his job as a journalist in the big city to a small village in Southern India. During his visit home, he encounters a beautiful Muslim woman

whose veil slips off her face and he falls instantly in love with her. Although many Indian films tell stories of divided lovers from different castes, classes, or regions, *Bombay* was the first film to portray a love story between a Hindu and a Muslim.<sup>61</sup> The two court in typical Bollywood-style: he falls in love at first sight, they declare their mutual love during elaborate musical numbers set in exotic locales, their families object and predictably disown them, and the young lovers risk all to be together. Eventually, they run away together to Mumbai where they marry in a secular ceremony. Soon after, Shaila finds out she is pregnant with twins and a montage efficiently conveys how happy the family is as the boys grow up. As the story develops, however, the obstacles Shekhar and Shaila face grow more difficult to overcome. Initially they encountered familial disapproval, but now riots between Hindus and Muslims actually physically separate their family. At this point in the film, Ratnam begins to incorporate documentary conventions such as a montage of newspaper clippings chronicling the destruction of the Barbari Mosque that sparked riots that led to over one thousand deaths, riots the film dramatizes in its second half. The rest of the film juxtaposes images of horrifying violence with emotional scenes of the family separated and then reunited in a compelling blend of romance, melodrama, and social realism.

The violence on screen in *Bombay* mirrors the actual violence that went on during the 1993 riots. Audiences look on helplessly as people are beaten, houses and cars are set on fire, friend turns against friend and neighbor against neighbor, and bodies of dead children literally pile up. After the Barbari Mosque was demolished, the Shiv Sena tried to claim responsibility. This assertion, along with other inflammatory acts by the Sena, helped instigate riots in Mumbai that were some of the worst in the country. For instance,

soon after the mosque's demolition, the Sena began staging celebratory public demonstrations and mass prayer ceremonies in Mumbai. At the same time, Muslims took to the streets protesting the demolition and were attacked by police. On January 8, 1993, a Hindu family was killed in a fire set by unknown assailants and the Shiv Sena demanded retaliation ordering its followers to "defend Hindus." In the next five days, Muslim homes and businesses throughout Mumbai were looted and set on fire, hundreds of Muslims were killed, and tens of thousands fled their homes in fear. The police did little to stop the violence and, in fact, allegedly participated in attacks on Muslims.<sup>62</sup> *Bombay* dramatizes the riots, but then, in the film's final scenes, the images of brutal violence we have been watching for over an hour are replaced with images of the family reunited and ordinary people risking their own lives to come between mobs and their victims. We see Shekhar stop a Hindu mob from setting a Muslim family on fire; an elderly Muslim woman takes a young Hindu woman in her arms and calls her "sister" while knocking the swords from her attackers' hands; a hijra steps between a Muslim man and his Hindu attackers begging them to stop;<sup>63</sup> a Mullah hides a Hindu in his mosque and blocks the mob from entering. These heroic acts and the new spirit of brotherhood they represent portend the end of the riots, and scenes of the family reunited quickly replace the terrifying scenes we have witnessed.

Structured around the themes of separation and reunion, *Bombay* repeatedly tears the family apart only to put it back together during emotionally-charged scenes. For instance, both Shekhar and Shaila are disowned by their families and later melodramatically reunited with their parents. The central action of the plot, however, revolves around the nuclear family made up of the couple and their twin boys who are

separated during the riots and then reunited in the film's climax. In this scene Shekhar, who has been searching for his sons for two days, suddenly sees them in the crowd. In slow motion the boys begin running towards their parents. Images of hands joining and people reconciling are intercut with shots of the twins making their way through the crowd. The *Bombay* theme plays as the boys continue to run towards their smiling parents. The spirit of unity builds; we see people lining up and joining hands. A close-up of clasped hands fills the frame. Finally, the boys reunite with their mother, and the camera circles the three figures who are silhouetted with a bright light behind them. We cut to a close-up of a hand reaching out. In the next shot, Shekhar enters frame and one of the boys runs into his arms. The camera pans down a line of people joining hands. We see the whole family embracing. A song plays, its lyrics hammering home the scene's message: "Let there be dreams of hope, let's usher in a new dawn." The final shot of the film shows the family holding each other and then superimposes the image of a male hand grasping a female hand. The song continues as the credits roll.

The twins with their mixed heritage and secular upbringing represent a new unity between Muslim and Hindu, an India free from communal violence. Thus the answer to this violence, according to the film, can be found in the nuclear family and in romantic love. Some audiences had trouble with this assertion, however, as Tejaswini Niranjana explains in an analysis of negative responses to *Bombay*:

Was it perhaps an indication that the liberal analysis and solution (communalism is caused by 'hatred' and can be cured by 'love') is unacceptable—as inaccurate, simplistic and patronizing—to those who comprise the majority amongst the victims of communal violence? Could it point to the need to rethink whose tolerance the dominant notion of secularism embodies, and whether 'love' and 'tolerance' can be recommended in equal measure to both majority and minority communities?<sup>64</sup>



She goes on to point out that although more Muslims than Hindus died in the 1993 riots, the film takes great pains to apportion blame equally. Ravi Vasudevan agrees, calling *Bombay* a “Hindu secularist narrative” that attempts a “bid for intercommunal reconciliation” yet cannot avoid “constructions of the Muslim as other.”<sup>65</sup> He cites many instances from the film of Muslims with knives charging through the streets crying out for blood. Of course, some Muslims did take to the streets and attack Hindus, but not in equal numbers to their Hindu counterparts and the police who overwhelmingly targeted Muslims. Although the film advocates tolerance and critiques communal violence, an almost fetishistic image of the violent Muslim male with prayer cap and sword or knife in hand is created. Thus, for all of *Bombay*’s obvious appeal and despite the productive interventions it is able to make, the film reveals some of the problems that accompany proposing love as the answer to violence.

When *Fire* refers to *Bombay*, a popular and controversial film that most Indian audiences would no doubt be familiar with, at the moment Radha’s sari burns, it reminds audiences of Shekhar and Shaila’s family and projects the image of communal violence resolved by love. Alluding to *Bombay* in that particular moment—one which dramatizes how fundamentalist notions of womanhood impact Radha’s life—links Hindutva constructions of women with the type of fundamentalist othering of Muslims that contributed to the riots documented in *Bombay*. The allusion makes visible the connections between the demand for women’s sexual purity and the construction of cultural others as a threat to that purity. Moreover, *Fire* illustrates the effects communalist narratives have on certain members of the majority community—in this case, Hindu women—reminding us that it is not only minority communities who suffer

under fundamentalism. Yet unlike *Bombay*, *Fire* avoids the trap of othering Muslims because it makes these critiques against Hindu fundamentalism without also imagining Muslim mobs and Muslim violence. *Fire* avoids another trap *Bombay*, with its heterosexual union and twin boys, falls into. By creating its national romance between two women, *Fire* finds a way of imagining the future of the nation without relying on the trope of heterosexual reproduction. In this way, it challenges the notion of the woman as the bearer of tradition and cultural reproducer.

Radha and Sita do not resemble the typical figures in a national romance. Hindu, middle-class, and North-Indian, they are not members of different racial, religious, or ethnic groups and their union does not, on its surface, allegorize the healing of a communal divide. *Fire* does, however, tell a story of two characters from different communities who are in love. Yet instead of depicting a Hindu/Muslim liaison, the film chooses to imagine the Hindu majority united with a minority community in the relationship between Jatin and his Chinese-Indian girlfriend, Julie. One of a number of couples whose relationships are contrasted with Radha and Sita's, Jatin and Julie serve as foils to the women and invariably suffer from the comparison. The couples are similar in that both relationships are extra-marital, but the film seems to judge the women less harshly, in part because it presents their options as more limited. Furthermore, in typical romance fashion, Radha and Sita's affair flies in the face of convention and must be hidden, whereas both families at least tacitly accept Jatin and Julie's relationship. In fact, Jatin's family had no objections to his marrying Julie, but she rejected his offer, preferring instead to keep alive what she calls "the hunt." They are not completely without constraints, however, and Jatin suspects Julie also objects to his family situation;

he lives in a joint household over the family's take-away shop, his finances are shared with the family, and his wife would presumably have a role in taking care of the elderly Biji. Instead of this life of domestic labor, Julie dreams of quitting her job as a hairdresser and moving to Hong Kong to be an actress in Kung Fu movies. Her character is thus constructed through a complicated mixture of attributes; she is associated with independence, migration, the dream world of cinema, the Far East, and even the West because of the American accent it took her six months to acquire. In addition, both Jatin and Julie with their Western clothing and their rejection of marriage are aligned with modernity, in contrast to Radha and Sita, who dress in saris and celebrate traditional Hindu holidays. Within the film's logic, then, Jatin and Julie deflect the charge that lesbianism is alien and non-traditional by establishing Radha and Sita as decidedly Indian and in some ways quite traditional in comparison, a move that flies in the face of fundamentalist rhetoric.<sup>66</sup>

Yet beyond functioning as a contrast to Radha and Sita, Jatin and Julie's relationship raises the issue of interracial unions and, in one scene in particular, allows Mehta to address the status of minorities in India. It is *Karva Chauth*—a Hindu holiday where wives fast for their husband's long lives—and while Sita waits at home for Jatin so she can break her day-long fast, he has dinner with Julie's family. They sit around a table at a crowded outdoor Chinese restaurant festively lit by colored lanterns. Julie wears a dark green silk cheongsam and Jatin is in a conservative dark suit and red tie, while the family is dressed in casual, Western clothes. We have not seen Jatin dressed so formally before and his clothing, along with his stiff posture and Julie's nervousness, indicates it may be the first time he has met her family. Julie's father, on the other hand, sits across

the table from the couple, comfortably smoking in an informal short-sleeved shirt. He has most of the scene's dialogue and allows for few interruptions as he tells the story of his family's migration to India. While most "forward-thinking Chinese" fled the Cultural Revolution and headed to Australia or the West, he explains to Jatin, his working-class parents came to India. The camera cuts between Julie's father telling his story, Jatin sitting stiffly, and Julie looking anxiously from one man to the other. Occasionally she feeds Jatin from her plate with chopsticks. "I hate it here," Julie's father says, complaining of Indian toilets and painting a picture of Indians as uncivilized. During his long diatribe, the camera pans from Julie to Jatin, both of whom look incredibly uncomfortable. His mood changes, however, as he begins to discuss Julie's plans to go to Hong Kong with the American accent it took her six months to learn; this is a migration he approves of. He follows his approbation with another indictment of India, but this time his target is the racism minorities face there. "What do they call you at school?" he asks his young son. "Chinky" the boy answers. The father shakes his head, repeating the taunt: "Chinky." "Now that India has gone from a developing to a developed country, there's no place for minorities here," he says. The camera turns to a disappointed Julie and an uncomfortable Jatin. Silent up until now, Jatin answers with the feeble retort, "We Indians are a complex people." Julie's father laughs and the tension is broken. The camera focuses again on Julie who smiles in relief and leans over to feed Jatin.

Audiences might expect that a story about minorities in India would focus on Muslims or perhaps Sikhs, communities with large populations on the subcontinent. Instead we get this brief account of the Chinese in India. We might also presume that the diaspora story in *Fire* would describe Indians leaving for the United Kingdom, the United

States, or Canada as Deepa Mehta did, yet the only such mention is Julie's planned immigration to Hong Kong. In this way, *Fire* disrupts audience expectations by telling less familiar stories and focusing on more anomalous situations. More important for my analysis, however, the inclusion of Julie and her father allows Mehta to have a character speak out and contest the treatment of minorities in India, yet the film stays clear of the highly-charged Hindu/Muslim communal divide, at least on its surface. Instead of a Muslim character critiquing Hindus or expressing anti-communal sentiments, we hear Julie's father's anti-Indian diatribe. Unlike *Bombay*, which depicts Muslim characters and apports them equal blame for communal troubles, *Fire* puts its critique in the mouth of a character who is a minority and is affected by the Hindutva agenda but who is not a Muslim.

Even though few Muslim characters populate the world of the text, Muslim spaces figure significantly. Although much of Radha and Sita's relationship takes place in the home and is enacted through domestic rituals such as oiling each other's hair, at a few key moments in the film they leave home and spend time together outside.<sup>67</sup>

Gopinath points out that at certain instances in the film Radha and Sita escape to "explicitly non-Hindu spaces" like mosques, shrines, and tombs.<sup>68</sup> Moorti recognizes their escapes as well but makes a larger claim about what they mean:

Indeed, rather than contest existing social structures, the two lovers seek refuge in a Muslim shrine. Fleeing from Hindu patriarchy the two turn to another religious institution rather than seek out a secular space. It is questionable whether any religious organization would offer these two women sanctuary, but Mehta opts to present a rosy, happy-ever-after ending that papers over the social conditions that render lesbians invisible in India.<sup>69</sup>

I would argue that Mehta's ending, although it reunites the lovers, is far from "rosy," as Radha has just escaped burning to death and the women have nowhere to go and few

resources. More importantly, quibbling about whether the Muslim community would take them in misses the point. Mehta is not suggesting that a Muslim community would be more inclusive of the women. By placing Radha and Sita in Muslim spaces, the film symbolically links same-sex desire, communal violence bridged by inter-communal romances, and secularism. I will illustrate this by looking briefly at two scenes that take place in Muslim sites; one occurs midway through the film when Radha and Sita visit a Muslim temple, while the second is the film's closing in the Nizamuddin shrine.

In this first scene we learn that Radha and Sita have closed the store for the day and plan to visit a temple. A long shot shows Radha and Sita carrying red garlands in their laps and wearing colorful dress saris as they ride a rickshaw through a crowded New Delhi street. In this and every subsequent shot in the scene the two women are in the frame together, often without any other figures present, emphasizing their status as a couple. A long, slow pan of the inside of a temple reveals a veiled woman and child entering. They leave an offering and walk out as Radha and Sita walk into the frame and the temple and continue towards the camera. The temple's walls are sea green and the columns are white marble with festive red garlands decorating them. Radha and Sita hand their garlands to someone in exchange for pieces of red cloth. A medium shot of both women in profile shows them tying the cloth onto a screen filled with many similar pieces. As she ties hers to the screen Sita says, "I wish we could be together forever." When Radha asks how they will survive if they leave their home, Sita playfully answers, "We'll open a take-away, of course." Although Radha and Sita joke with each other, this is both the first time we have heard either woman directly express her feelings for the other and that they have discussed the future. The choice to set this key scene outside the

home and in a Muslim space is significant, suggesting that it is only outside the home, and by extension outside the Hindu nation, that they can imagine a future together.

Suddenly, loud, festive music begins to play and the women turn and walk towards its source. They enter a large courtyard and sit down in a circle of people gathered around the musicians. Everyone smiles and sways or claps to the music. A group of men sit singing, while other men drum. Radha and Sita sit with a group of children in a loose circle watching the musicians. The refrain of the song, “Allah hunh,” is not subtitled, but the mood translates easily; this is a joyous song proclaiming God’s goodness. Medium shots of an older man singing and a younger man who drums are intercut with shots of Radha and Sita watching the musicians. They smile and sway, caught up in the song. The open space, the beautiful day, the community of people coming together in celebration, and the festive singing contrast the close quarters and busy workdays in the joint family home. Moreover, the women are framed side by side and thus visually portrayed as a couple, as opposed to at home when other figures often come between them. Everything in the *mise en scene* is beautiful, bright, and hopeful: the rich colors of the sea green walls, the red garlands, and the women’s deep orange and brown saris all reflect the mood of the scene.

In one other key scene Radha and Sita again appear in a Muslim space: the film’s finale. After Radha’s sari has caught fire and Ashok has left her in the apartment, the screen fades to white. The next scene opens with a slow pan of a shrine at night. Columns partially obstruct our view as the camera pans across the expansive courtyard. Rain falls in the open spaces divided by columns from other covered areas. The shrine is beautiful and quiet, a dramatic contrast to the previous scene set in the cramped kitchen. The

architecture is alternately shrouded and highlighted by the uneven light which changes as the camera pans across the shrine. At first the space appears empty, but then we see a figure in orange standing in a pool of light. The camera centers on this figure and the next shot reveals that it is Sita. In a close-up we see her looking up at the sky with her eyes closed as rain falls down on her. She eventually lowers her head and faces forward. The image of rain and the sound of water are a sharp contrast to the fire in the last scene. The camera cuts to a full shot of Radha, drenched and in a blackened sari which is torn at the bottom. She looks around the shrine and walks shakily forward. In the same moment she sees Sita and, relieved and weak, leans against a column. A close-up shows Sita who sees something in the distance but cannot tell who or what it is. The next shot seems to be from Radha's point of view and reveals Sita from afar standing in the rain and peering into the distance. Sita begins to move forward slowly with a concerned expression on her face. In a close-up, Radha breathes heavily and continues to lean against the column in the shadows as if she needs the support and is unable to move. Sita's face in close-up reveals that she has realized Radha has come and begins to run towards her past the camera.

The music swells and a long shot reveals the entire shrine from a distance. The camera moves slowly up and backwards until we are looking down on the shrine. The distance enables us to see the trees outside, the shrine itself, and, if we are still uncertain if this is a Muslim space, the domes of the tomb confirm it. It is still raining and the space seems tranquil and uninhabited. Then, in between two pillars, we can just make out a figure. A second figure runs to the first. A pool of light illuminates them in the mostly darkened shrine. They are in silhouette and from this distance we cannot see their faces.



Sita draws Radha into her arms. At first Radha is still but then she raises her arms and embraces Sita. The camera continues to move up and backwards and the shot slowly fades to black. The pool of light illuminating the women is the last part of the frame to fade. This is a classic romantic shot: the two lovers united as the film closes. They have arrived in each other's arms but only after a terrible separation where one of them was in grave danger. We are meant to breathe a sigh of relief and celebrate their reunion.

The setting of this scene is even more important than the composition of shots and the editing. Radha and Sita's reunion is staged in the Nizamuddin shrine which is built around the tomb of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, a revered Sufi poet and saint.

Nizamuddin was a fourteenth century mystic who preached prayer, love, and the unity of all living things, and his shrine has become known as a refuge for the destitute and poets among others. Tradition states that if one's heart is pure and one asks for something from the saint, it will be granted.<sup>70</sup> Although it is a shrine to a Sufi saint, Hindus, Sikhs, and other Muslims all visit the shrine, even though some sects of Islam object to Sufi practices of praying to saints, dancing, and playing music. These more Orthodox Muslims believe that Sufism is too mystical, based on superstition, and thus not representative of the real Islam. The site is not only a Muslim space, therefore; it is a space that stands in opposition to fundamentalisms of all kinds, a religious and sacred space where all are welcome to take sanctuary. Rather than imagining a fantasy space as *My Beautiful Laundrette* does, Mehta chooses to end her film and reunite her lovers in a real site that signifies love and stands outside both Hindu fundamentalism and orthodox Islam. The saint's message of the unity of all things stands in opposition to the communal violence ravaging India. The closing scene which opened with the aural reference to

*Bombay* ends with the visual image of the Nizamuddin shrine. If communal violence and Hindu fundamentalism are alluded to in the opening of this final scene, then the idea of love overcoming communal violence and the unity of all things ends it. Anti-fundamentalist spaces, Hindu-Muslim unions, same-sex love, and a sort of secularism that is embodied here are the answers *Fire* proposes to the Hindutva agenda.

*Fire* shows us what becomes possible when the nation is imagined in a same-sex romance between women. Beyond the critique of nationalist homophobias that all queer national romances produce, these texts challenge fundamentalist discourses at another level. They rewrite nationalist imaginings of women and, in doing so, they contest notions of citizenship based on heterosexual reproduction. Female national romances demand that we come up with new ways of imagining our communities, new means of describing our affiliations to one another, and new conceptions of citizenship that do not rely on heteronormative reproductive models.

---

<sup>1</sup> “India Poster Campaign Against Intolerance,” *The Hindu*, January 5, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (New York: Vintage, 1989); Shyam Selvadurai, *Funny Boy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> *Fire*, DVD, directed by Deepa Mehta (Zeigeist Films, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Set in India, written and directed by an Indian-Canadian filmmaker, and financed by North American and Indian investors, *Fire* cannot easily be contained inside national boundaries. Even though it has much in common with films by other South Asian diasporic directors, a number of which also tell stories of forbidden romance—for example, *Mississippi Masala*, *Bhaji on the Beach*, and *Bend it Like Beckham*—*Fire* attempts to intervene in the *Indian* national context. Therefore, I compare it to other films also addressing that context, most of which are Indian. *Mississippi Masala*, DVD, directed by Mira Nair (SCS Films, 1992); *Bhaji on the Beach*, videocassette, directed by Gurinder Chada (First Look, 1993); *Bend it Like Beckham*, DVD, directed by Gurinder Chada (Twentieth Century Fox, 2002).

---

<sup>5</sup> *1942: A Love Story*, DVD, directed by Vidhu Chopra (Eros, 1993); *Bombay*, DVD, directed by Mani Ratnam (Amitabh Bachchan Co., 1995); *Mr and Mrs Iyer*, DVD, directed by Aparna Sen (Triplecorn Media, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India*, DVD, directed by Ashutosh Gowariker (Eros, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> There are a number of excellent studies of religious nationalism and the rise of Hindu fundamentalism. See, for example, Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) and Peter Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Sheela Raval, "I Added Petrol," interview with Bal Thackeray, *India Today*, December 21, 1998, <http://www.india.today.com/itoday/21121998/>.

<sup>9</sup> As a means of getting publicity the director started the rumor that right wing groups intended to demonstrate against his film, and, in an ironic twist, the Shiv Sena did eventually protest it but not as vociferously as they did *Fire*. *Bombay Boys*, videocassette, directed by Kaizad Gustad (Kismet Talkies, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Gay and lesbian groups also protested *Girlfriend* because of its negative portrayal of a psychotic, predatory lesbian and its blatant use of sex between women to titillate audiences. *Girlfriend*, DVD, directed by Karan Razdan (Eros, 2004); Harbaksh Singh Nanda, "Lesbian Movie Raises Eyebrows in India," *Washington Times*, June 16, 2004, <http://washingtontimes.com/upi-breaking/20040616-123447-8355r.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> The Indian Board of Film Censors often asserts a desire to keep certain ideas and images from "the masses" who see films in Hindi. Films in English are not held to as high a level of scrutiny because the board does not perceive this more educated audience as in need of such protection. For an insightful analysis of the work of the Indian Film Censor Board see Monica Mehta, *Selections: Cutting, Classifying, and Certifying in Bombay Cinema* (Austin: U of Texas P, forthcoming). For information on the name changes in *Fire* see "Nameless Heroines to Rekindle Fire in Maharashtra," *Statesman* (India), February 24, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999), 178.

<sup>13</sup> *The Ramayana*, videocassette, directed by Ramachand Sagar (Doordarshan, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> Here Mehta draws on the long tradition of a woman being used as a symbol for India. For instance, anti-colonial nationalists used the figure of the raped woman to symbolize India in an attempt to move audiences to act against the British colonizers. The British also employed the Indian woman as a symbol to motivate their constituents; they held up practices such as sati and child marriage as evidence that, as Gayatri Spivak puts it, "white men are saving brown women from brown men." Since 1947, artists and poets have illustrated the psychic as well as literal violence that accompanied Partition through images of raped, mutilated, or dismembered women. As is evident from just these few examples, the image of the Indian woman in jeopardy can be mobilized for various political ends. Unsurprisingly, filmmakers have often picked up this trope and allegorized the nation in the figure of a woman, perhaps most famously in *Mother India* (1954). Thus, the symbol of the woman standing for the nation is readily available for Indians

---

audiences and Mehta uses it quite effectively. *Mother India*, DVD, directed by Mehboob Khan (Eros, 1957.)

<sup>15</sup> *Earth/1947*, DVD, directed by Deepa Mehta (G<sup>2</sup>, 1998); *Water*, film, directed by Deepa Mehta (Mongrel Media, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the trilogy, most of Mehta's other films are set in Canada or the United States. See *Camilla*, videocassette (Malofilm, 1994); *Bollywood/Hollywood*, DVD (Mongrel Media, 2002); and *The Republic of Love*, videocassette (Seville Pictures, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Bapsi Sidwa, *Cracking India* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Press, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Although *Fire* was Mehta's first film to be protested, it was not the last. In 2000 Mehta was forced to suspend production on *Water* because a coalition of Hindu fundamentalist groups including the Shiv Sena, objected to the film, saying it denigrates Hinduism. Fundamentalist thugs destroyed the film set, threatened the cast and crew, and caused multiple delays in filming. Mehta eventually finished shooting the film in Sri Lanka and hopes to release *Water* in early 2005. Jasmine Yuen-Carrucan, "The Politics of Deepa Mehta's *Water*," *Bright Lights Film Journal* 28 (April 2000), <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/28/water.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Ironically, during production the Canadian government declared *Fire* ineligible for government funding because it was not "Canadian" enough in subject, setting, and backing.

<sup>20</sup> The protests against *Fire* are well-documented. The most thorough analyses can be found in Madhu Jain, "Ire Over Fire," *India Today*, December 21, 1998, <http://www.india-today.com/itoday/21121998>; Geeta Patel, "On Fire: Sexuality and Its Incitements," in *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, ed. Ruth Vanita, 222-233 (New York: Routledge, 2002); and Jigna Desai, *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> "Nameless."

<sup>22</sup> Jain, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Raval.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Arguments that attempt to construct an indigenous Indian queerness, however, often get mired in definitional problems. Although same-sex practices certainly exist in India and have existed for some time, they are not always perceived as leading to an identity. In a discussion of queer sexuality in India today, Ruth Vanita writes, "Such terms do not denote exclusive, sealed-off categories. In India, most people have been, and many continue to be, married off at a very young age. Hence, exclusive same-sex relationships are necessarily rare. However, ongoing same-sex relationships, for both men and women, often coexist with the obligations and privileges of marriage, and may function as primary erotic and emotional relationships." Ruth Vanita, "Introduction," in *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, ed. Ruth Vanita (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

<sup>26</sup> Barry Bearak, "A Lesbian Idyll and the Movie Theaters Surrender," *New York Times*, December 24, 1998.

<sup>27</sup> Jain, 2.

- 
- <sup>28</sup> Monica Bachmann presents a thorough analysis of left, liberal and feminist responses in India to the attacks on *Fire*. Monica Bachmann, "After the Fire," in *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, ed. Ruth Vanita, 234-243 (New York: Routledge, 2002).
- <sup>29</sup> Mehta has taken a variety of positions in defense of the film. Her shifting responses have been well-documented and analyzed by Desai, 185.
- <sup>30</sup> Gayatri Gopinath, "On Fire," *GLQ* 4, no. 4 (1998): 631-36; Vanita; and Desai.
- <sup>31</sup> Ebert is joined by Lawrence Van Gelder of *The New York Times* and Daniel Lak of the BBC Online News, among others, who read the film as proto-feminist and pre-gay. Roger Ebert, review of *Fire*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 2, 1999.
- <sup>32</sup> Vanita, 1.
- <sup>33</sup> Peter Popham, "Film Breaks Silence of India's Lesbians," *Independent* (London), December 20, 1998.
- <sup>34</sup> For more on the global reactions to *Fire* see Gayatri Gopinath, "Local Sites/Global Contexts: The Transnational Trajectories of Deepa Mehta's *Fire*," in *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, ed. Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan IV (New York: New York UP, 2002).
- <sup>35</sup> "India Poster Campaign."
- <sup>36</sup> Gopinath, "On Fire," 635.
- <sup>37</sup> Sujata Moorti, "Inflamed Passions: *Fire*, The Woman Question, and the Policing of Cultural Boundaries," *Genders* 32 (2000), [http://www.genders.org/g32/g32\\_moorti.html](http://www.genders.org/g32/g32_moorti.html), par.1-2.
- <sup>38</sup> Moorti; Desai.
- <sup>39</sup> Gopinath, "On Fire," 633; Ismat Chughtai, *The Quilt and Other Stories* (New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 1994).
- <sup>40</sup> The epic varies regionally and many versions exist but all tell this basic frame story. See, for instance, A.L. Dallapiccola, *Hindu Myths* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2003).
- <sup>41</sup> Mankekar, 222.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.
- <sup>44</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), 87.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.
- <sup>46</sup> Mankekar, 5.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.
- <sup>49</sup> Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 219.
- <sup>50</sup> Van der Veer, 175-6.
- <sup>51</sup> See, for instance, Mankekar, Van der Veer, and Mishra.
- <sup>52</sup> Mankekar, 166.
- <sup>53</sup> Van der Veer, 9.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.
- <sup>55</sup> The *rakshasas* are the demons who Ram fights and in this *Ramayana* they are depicted as huge, bestial, and dark-complexioned.

---

<sup>56</sup> Mishra, 209.

<sup>57</sup> A long tradition of men playing both male and female characters exists in India. Although women now act in public, it would not surprise audiences to see a man playing Sita.

<sup>58</sup> Mankekar, 213.

<sup>59</sup> Desai, 165.

<sup>60</sup> Indian popular music is film music; it plays on the radio, in videos, and in the streets, and most audiences would recognize the music from a popular film like *Bombay*.

<sup>61</sup> A few films have followed *Bombay*'s lead including Yash Chopra's *Veer-Zaara* which I mentioned in the introduction. *Veer-Zaara*, Chopra has stated, is the veteran director's attempt to heal the wounds of Partition by creating a romance between a Hindu Indian man and a Pakistani woman. *Veer-Zaara*, DVD, directed by Yash Chopra (Yash Raj Films, 2004).

<sup>62</sup> For information on the riots see Van der Veer and Hansen.

<sup>63</sup> Hijras (or hijiras) constitute a "third sex" in India and Pakistan that is acknowledged by both Hindu and Muslim cultures. The word hijra means hermaphrodite in Urdu and many hijra choose to undergo castration. *Bombay* may be suggesting that the character's liminal gender status places her outside the logic of communalism.

<sup>64</sup> Tejaswini Niranjana, "Nationalism Reconfigured: Contemporary South Indian Cinema and the Subject of Feminism," in *Community, Gender and Violence*, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan, 138-166 (London: Hurst, 2000), 164.

<sup>65</sup> Ravi Vasudevan, "Bombay and Its Publics," in *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*, ed. Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney, 186-211 (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2001), 191.

<sup>66</sup> Tradition and modernity are complicated terms in the film and in some ways it is too simple to align one set of characters or even one character with tradition and the other with modernity. Radha/Sita do stand in opposition to Jatin/Julie, however, and the film uses this opposition to code same-sex desire as Indian and not incompatible with tradition. See Gopinath's "Local Sites" for a more thorough discussion of modernity and tradition in *Fire*.

<sup>67</sup> For more on the film's queering of the domestic and its impact see Gopinath, "On Fire."

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 635.

<sup>69</sup> Moorti, par. 17.

<sup>70</sup> William Dalrymple, "Real Islam," *TimeAsia*, July 26, 2004, <http://www.time.com/time/asia/2004/journey/india.html>.

## Conclusion

This project began in the summer of 2000 when I saw the fascinating and disturbing film *Aimee and Jaguar* (1999).<sup>1</sup> I had originally planned to write a dissertation that explored the implications of a transnational lesbian and gay identity that was being assumed and, I argued, constructed by film festivals, anthologies, and the gay press in the late 1990s. For example, while texts like *The Vintage Book of International Lesbian Fiction* (1999) challenge the Western focus of much gay and lesbian cultural production, they run the risk of imposing a particular construct of sexuality onto other forms of identifying and desiring.<sup>2</sup> The goal of the project, as I imagined it then, would be to examine the ways forces such as nationalism and transnationalism intersect with other identity forming discourses like sexuality in particular queer postcolonial texts. For whom and by whom, I wanted to know, were these definitions of an international gay and lesbian identity constructed? In what ways are those with same-sex desires who do not construct their identities along the lines of particular types of Western GLBT culture oversimplified or misnamed? What are the political and social consequences of such constructions and for whom? Finally, in what ways does a transnational framework complicate analysis of national contexts?

These questions remained at the core of this project; however, the issues raised by *Aimee and Jaguar* shifted my focus to the genre of romance. *Aimee and Jaguar* chooses to narrate both the Holocaust and its legacy through the trope of the lesbian romance. After seeing the film I became fascinated by the way romance narratives can powerfully intervene in discussions of nation and citizenship. I was struck by how manipulative romance can be, how it positions audiences to identify with and desire particular unions,

and how it can erase or mask other concerns. What both disturbed and intrigued me about *Aimee and Jaguar* is how the film asks us to enter into the romance by identifying with Lilly, a German woman, who sees the Holocaust as a tragedy only because it took her Jewish lover from her. While *Aimee and Jaguar* dropped out of the project because of the difficulty of moving between too many disparate sites, seeing it brought questions about the function of romance in texts about national crises to the forefront of my project. How, I wondered, does romance function as a generic device and an ideological trope? And how does it relate to constructions of the national, the transnational, and the diasporic?

I end this project as I began it, thinking about what types of queer postcolonial texts circulate and what kinds of political and cultural impact they have. I have argued that the sheer number of queer films from postcolonial nations that choose to tell their stories as national romances demands we take note. This popularity is, in part, a factor of the market. *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) established how successful these kinds of films could be on an international stage and *The Crying Game* (1992) exceeded that first film's success to become one of the highest-grossing films of that year.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Jose Gabilondo claims that after the release of *The Crying Game*, "the 1990s have shown a global taste for 'queer' films" (a trend Hollywood quickly duplicated).<sup>4</sup> I would argue that this taste does not seem to have abated with the turn of the century. The year 2001, for instance, saw the release of *Borstal Boy*, *Y tu mamá también*, and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and the publication of the Irish novel *At Swim, Two Boys*.<sup>5</sup>

In this dissertation I have attempted to analyze the ways the queer national romance functions as it shifts national and political contexts. I highlight its regressive tendencies while pointing out the visionary potential some examples of the genre display



to caution audiences—especially queer audiences—that we must think before we uncritically accept texts which challenge homophobic nationalisms. In an analysis of South Asian diasporic films Jigna Desai argues,

Globalization has already and will increasingly create hypervisibility of certain films; we must ask which films and why. How are they located in certain circuits of circulation and reception? What kinds of transnational imaginary will they produce that coincides, rewrites, and contradicts previous colonial, national, gendered, sexual, and racialized narratives?<sup>6</sup>

Desai articulates the importance of analyzing popular forms and genres; we must look at both their generic conventions and how they circulate. In response to this hypervisibility Gayatri Gopinath suggests,

What is needed, then, is a more nuanced understanding of the traffic and travel of competing systems of desire in a transnational frame and of how colonial structures of knowing and seeing remain in place within a discourse of an “international” lesbian and gay movement.<sup>7</sup>

My project traces one particular “structure of knowing and seeing” that does in fact “coincide,” “rewrite,” and “contradict” a specific colonial narrative structure. Yet while its roots are so clearly in this colonial narrative structure, the queer national romance works in various ways and can be mobilized for different political ends. Thus I contribute to a growing body of interdisciplinary work that examines the interconnections between gender, sexuality, nationalism, and transnationalism. While critical work in the 1990s illustrated how discourses of sexuality and nationalism intersected and impacted one another, recent criticism makes clear how many queer authors, filmmakers, and individuals imagine themselves as part of communities that cross national boundaries.<sup>8</sup> My project builds off both bodies of work as it suggests better ways of understanding the role of popular culture in transnational circuits of consumption and its potential to create new forms of imagined communities.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Aimee and Jaguar*, DVD, directed by Max Farberbock (Zeitgeist Films, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Naomi Holoch and Joan Nestle, eds. *The Vintage Book of International Lesbian Fiction* (New York: Vintage, 1999). See also Mark Mitchell, ed. *The Penguin Book of International Gay Writing* (New York: Viking, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> *My Beautiful Laundrette*, DVD, directed by Stephen Frears (Orion Classics, 1985); *The Crying Game*, DVD, directed by Neil Jordan (Miramax, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Jose Gabilondo, "Like Blood for Chocolate, Like Queers for Vampires: Border and Global Consumption," in *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, ed. Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan IV, 236-264 (New York: New York UP, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> *Borstal Boy*, DVD, directed by Peter Sheridan (Strand, 2000); *Y tu mamá también*, DVD, directed by Alfonso Cuarón (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2001); *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, DVD, directed by John Cameron Mitchell (Killer Films, 2001); Jamie O'Neill, *At Swim, Two Boys* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2001). While these texts have very different relationships to the queer national romance, they all engage with it on some level.

<sup>6</sup> Jigna Desai, *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 69.

<sup>7</sup> Gayatri Gopinath, "Homo-Economics: Queer Sexualities in a Transnational Frame," in *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity*, ed. Rosemary Marangoly George (New York: Westview P, 1998), 117.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Cindy Patton and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, eds. *Queer Diasporas* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000); Martin F. Manalansan IV, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003); Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005).

## Works Cited

- Alderson, David. "Desire as Nostalgia: the Novels of Alan Hollinghurst." In *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture: Refiguring Contemporary Boundaries*, edited by David Alderson and Linda Anderson, 29-48. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000.
- Aldrich, Robert. *Colonialism and Homosexuality*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Alexander, M. Jacqui. "Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of State Practice in the Bahamas Tourist Economy." In *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, edited by M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty, 63-100. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Allen, Dennis. "Homosexuality and Narrative." *Modern Fiction Studies* 41, no. 3-4 (1995): 609-634.
- Altman, Dennis. "Global Gaze/Global Gays." *GLQ* 3 (1997): 417-36.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Global Sex*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition. London: Verso, 1991.
- Bachmann, Monica. "After the Fire." In *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, edited by Ruth Vanita, 234-243. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Barber, Susan Torrey. "Insurmountable Difficulties and Moments of Ecstasy: Crossing Class, Ethnic, and Sexual Barriers in the Films of Stephen Frears." In *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, edited by Lester Friedman, 311-328. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.
- Behan, Brendan. *The Hostage*. New York: Grove Press, 1958.
- Beer, Gillian. *The Romance*. London: Methuen, 1970.
- Boone, Joseph. "Vacation Cruises: or, The Homoerotics of Orientalism." *PMLA* 110, no. 1 (January 1995): 89-107.
- Bordwell, David, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985.
- Bristow, Joseph. *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing After 1885*. Buckingham: Open UP, 1995.

- Canning, Richard. *Gay Fiction Speaks: Conversations with Gay Novelists*. New York: Columbia UP, 2000.
- Chari, Hema. "Colonial Fantasies and Postcolonial Identities: Elaboration of Postcolonial Masculinity and Homoerotic Desire." In *Postcolonial, Queer*, edited by John C. Hawley, 277-304. Albany: SUNY P, 2001.
- Chauncey, George and Elizabeth A. Povinelli, eds. "Thinking Sexuality Transnationally." *GLQ* 5, no. 4 (1999).
- Chughtai, Ismat. *The Quilt and Other Stories*. New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 1994.
- Cleary, Joe. *Literature, Partition and the Nation State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- Cooper, Brenda. "Snapshots of Postcolonial Masculinities: Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 34, no. 1 (1999): 135-57.
- Crimp, Douglas. *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology P, 2002.
- Cruz-Malave, Arnaldo and Martin F. Manalansan IV, eds., *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*. New York: New York UP, 2002.
- Cullingford, Elizabeth Butler. "Gender, Sexuality and Englishness in Modern Irish Drama and Film." In *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, edited by Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, 159-86. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Ireland's Others: Ethnicity and Gender in Irish Literature and Popular Culture*. South Bend, Ind.: U of Notre Dame P, 2001.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003.
- Dallapiccola, A.L. *Hindu Myths*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2003.
- Dellamora, Richard. *Friendship's Bonds: Democracy and the Novel in Victorian England*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2004.
- Deonandan, Ray. "The Human Condition Explored: An Interview with Shyam Selvadurai." *India Currents Magazine*, April 1996.
- Desai, Gaurav. "Out in Africa." In *Postcolonial, Queer*, edited by John C. Hawley, Albany: SUNY P, 2001.

- Desai, Jigna. *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Edge, Sarah. "Women are trouble, did you know that Fergus?" Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*." *Feminist Review* 50 (Summer 1995): 173-186.
- Eng, David and Shinhee Han. "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia." *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 10, no. 4 (2000): 677-700.
- Eng, David and David Kazanjian, eds. *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2003.
- Evans, Peter William and Celestino Deleyto. *Terms of Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and 1990s*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998.
- Fink, Sumaka'i and Jacob Press. "Walid." In *Queer Diaporas*, edited by Cindy Patton and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, 263-280. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.
- Forster, E.M. *A Passage to India*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1924.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." In *General Psychological Theory*, 164-179. New York: Collier, 1963.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957.
- Fuglerud, Oivind. *Life on the Outside: The Tamil Diaspora and Long Distance Nationalism*. London: Pluto Press, 1999.
- Jose Gabilondo, "Like Blood for Chocolate, Like Queers for Vampires: Border and Global Consumption," in *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, edited by Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan IV, 236-264. New York: New York UP, 2002.
- Gambone, Philip. *Something Inside: Conversations with Gay Fiction Writers*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1999.
- Ghosh, Amitav. "The Greatest Sorrow: Times of Joy Recalled in Wretchedness." *Kenyon Review* 25, no. 3/4 (Summer 2003): 86-99.
- Giles, Jane. *The Crying Game*. London: British Film Institute, 1997.
- Gopinath, Gayatri. "Homo-Economics: Queer Sexualities in a Transnational Frame." In *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity*, edited by Rosemary Marangoly George. New York: Westview P, 1998.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Local Sites/Global Contexts: The Transnational Trajectories of Deepa Mehta's *Fire*." In *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, edited by Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan IV, 149-161. New York: New York UP, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 467-489.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "On Fire." *GLQ* 4, no. 4 (1998): 631-36.
- Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996.
- Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. New York: Bantam, 1972.
- Halberstam, Judith. "The Crying Game." In *The Ultimate Guide to Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, edited by Jenni Olson. New York: Serpent's Tail, 1996.
- Handler, Kristin. "Sexing *The Crying Game*: Difference, Identity, Ethics." *Film Quarterly*. 47, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 31-42.
- Hansen, Thomas Blom. *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.
- Harper, Philip Brian, Anne McClintock, Jose Esteban Munoz, Trish Rosen, eds. "Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender." *Social Text* 52-53 (Fall/Winter 1997).
- Hawley, John C., ed. *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*. Albany: SUNY P, 2001.
- Hayes, Jarrod. "Queer Resistance to (Neo-)colonialism in Algeria." In *Postcolonial, Queer*, edited by John C. Hawley, 79-97. Albany: SUNY P, 2001.
- Heng, Geraldine. *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*. New York: Columbia UP, 2003.
- Henriques, Julian. "Realism and the New Language." In *Black Film, British Cinema: ICA Documents*, 18-20. London: British Film Institute, 1988.
- Higson, Andrew. *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama Since 1980*. London: Oxford, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*. Oxford:

- Clarendon P, 1995.
- Hill, John. *British Cinema in the 1980s: Issues and Themes*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1999.
- Hoad, Neville. "Between the White Man's Burden and the White Man's Disease: Tracking Lesbian and Gay Human Rights in Southern Africa," *GLQ* 5, no. 4 (1999): 559-584.
- Holden and Richard J. Ruppel, eds. *Imperial Desire: Dissident Sexualities and Colonial Literature*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003.
- Hollinghurst, Alan. *The Swimming-Pool Library*. New York: Vintage, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Line of Beauty*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2004.
- Holoch, Naomi and Joan Nestle, eds. *The Vintage Book of International Lesbian Fiction*. New York: Vintage, 1999.
- hooks, bell. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Hyam, Ronald. *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990.
- Jamal, Mahmood. "Dirty Linen." In *Black Film, British Cinema: ICA Documents*, 21-22. London: British Film Institute, 1988.
- James, Jamie. "The Toronto Circle." *Atlantic Monthly* 285, no. 4 (April 2000): 126-130.
- Kaleta, Kenneth. *Hanif Kureishi: Postcolonial Storyteller*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1998.
- Kureishi, Hanif. *The Black Album*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Buddha of Suburbia*. New York: Penguin, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *My Beautiful Laundrette and the Rainbow Sign*. London: Faber, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid: The Screenplay and the Screenwriter's Diary*. New York: Penguin, 1988.
- Landon, Margaret. *Anna and the King of Siam*. New York: John Day, 1944.
- Lane, Christopher. *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.
- Leonowens, Anna. *The English Governess at the Siamese Court*. Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1870.

- Lowenthal, David. *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*. London: Viking, 1997.
- Malik, Sarita. "Beyond 'The Cinema of Duty'? The Pleasure of Hybridity: Black British Film of the 1980s and 1990s." In *Dissolving Views: Key Writings in British Cinema*, edited by Andrew Higson, 202-215. London: Cassell, 1996.
- Manalansan, Martin IV. *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "In the Shadows of Stonewall: Examining Gay Transnational Politics and the Diasporic Dilemma." *GLQ* 2, no. 4 (1995): 425-438.
- Mani, Bakirathi and Sandip Roy. "In Charge of His Own Definitions: A Conversation with Hanif Kureishi." *Trikone* 16, no. 3 (July 2001): 6-8.
- Mankekar, Purnima. *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999.
- Marks, Jim. "The Personal Is Political: an Interview with Shyam Selvadurai." *Lambda Book Report* 5, no. 2 (September 1996): 1-4.
- Martin, Biddy. *Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being Lesbian*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Martin, Robert and George Piggford, eds. *Queer Forster*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997.
- McGuinness, Frank. *Frank McGuinness: Plays One*. New York: Faber and Faber, 1996.
- McLoone, Martin. *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema*. London: British Film Institute, 2000.
- McRuer, Robert. "Boys' Own Stories and New Spellings of My Name: Coming Out and Other Myths of Queer Positionality." In *Eroticism and Containment: Notes from the Flood Plain*, edited by Carol Siegel and Ann Kibbey, 260-284. New York: New York UP, 1994.
- Mehta, Monica. *Selections: Cutting, Classifying, and Certifying in Bombay Cinema*. Austin: U of Texas P, forthcoming.
- Mercer, Kobena. "Recoding Narratives of Race and Nation." In *Black Film, British Cinema: ICA Documents*, 4-14. London: British Film Institute, 1988.
- Mishra, Vijay. *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*. New York: Routledge, 2002.



- Mitchell, Mark ed. *The Penguin Book of International Gay Writing*. New York: Viking, 1995.
- Moore, Lisa. "Acts of Union: Sexuality and Nationalism, Romance and Realism in the Irish National Tale." *Cultural Critique* 44 (Winter 2000): 113-144.
- Moorti, Sujata. "Inflamed Passions: *Fire*, The Woman Question, and the Policing of Cultural Boundaries." *Genders* 32 (2000).  
[http://www.genders.org/g32/g32\\_moorti.html](http://www.genders.org/g32/g32_moorti.html).
- Munoz, Jose. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999.
- Newbolt, Henry. *A Book of Verse: Chosen for Students at Home and Abroad*. London: G. Bell and Sons, 1922.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Selected Poems of Sir Henry Newbolt*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1940.
- Niranjana, Tejaswini. "Nationalism Reconfigured: Contemporary South Indian Cinema and the Subject of Feminism." In *Community, Gender and Violence*, edited by Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan, 138-66. London: Hurst, 2000.
- Nissan, Elizabeth and R.L. Stirrat. "The Generation of Communal Identities." In *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of the Conflict*, edited by Jonathan Spencer, 19-44. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- O'Connor, Frank. *Guests of the Nation*. New York: Macmillan, 1931.
- Pandey, Gyanandra. *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Patel, Geeta. "On *Fire*: Sexuality and Its Incitements." In *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, edited by Ruth Vanita, 222-33. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Patton, Cindy and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, eds., *Queer Diasporas*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.
- Pettitt, Lance. *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000.
- Pramaggiore, Maria. "'I Kinda Liked You as a Girl': Masculinity, Postcolonial Queens, and the "Nature" of Terrorism in Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*." In *Contemporary Irish Cinema from the Quiet Man to Dancing at Lughnasa*, edited by James MacKillop, 87-97. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1999.

- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Preston, Catherine. "Hanging on a Star: The Resurrection of the Romance Film in the 1990s." In *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays*, edited by Wheeler Winston Dixon, 227-243. Albany: SUNY UP, 2000.
- Probyn, Elspeth. "Suspended Beginnings: Of Childhood and Nostalgia." *GLQ* 2, no. 4 (1995): 439-466.
- Quart, Leonard. "The Politics of Irony: The Frears-Kureishi Films." In *Re-Viewing British Cinema, 1900-1992*, edited by Wheeler Winston Dixon, 241-48. Albany: State U of New York P, 1994.
- Radway, Janice. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1991.
- Rockett, Kevin. "Culture, Industry and Irish Cinema." In *Border Crossing: Film in Ireland, Britain and Europe*, edited by Martin McLoone and Paul Hainsworth, 126-39. Ulster: Institute of Irish Studies, 1994.
- Rockett, Kevin, Luke Gibbons, and John Hill. *Cinema and Ireland*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1988.
- Rofel, Lisa. "Qualities of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities in China." *GLQ* 5, no. 4 (1999): 451-474.
- Rogers, Lori. *Feminine Nation: Performance, Gender and Resistance in the Works of John McGahern and Neil Jordan*. Lanham, Md.: U P of America, 1998.
- Rushdie, Salman. "Outside the Whale." *Granta* 11 (1984): 125-38.
- Sabaratnam, Lakshmanan. *Ethnic Attachments in Sri Lanka: Social Change and Cultural Continuity*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985.
- Selvadurai, Shyam. *Funny Boy*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Cinnamon Gardens*. New York: Hyperion, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Personal Website. <http://www.interlog.com/~funnyboy/index.htm>.
- Senaratne, Jagath. *Political Violence in Sri Lanka, 1977-1990: Riots, Insurrections, Counterinsurgencies, Foreign Intervention*. Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1997.

- Sidwa, Bapsi. *Cracking India*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Press, 1991.
- Silber, Nina. *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997.
- Simpson, Mark. *Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity*. London: Cassell, 1994.
- Sinfield, Alan. "Culture, Consensus, and Difference: Angus Wilson to Alan Hollinghurst." In *British Culture of the Postwar: An Introduction to Literature and Society 1945-1999*, edited by Alan Sinfield and Alistair Davies, 83-102. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Slide, Anthony. *The Cinema and Ireland*. London: McFarland and Co., 1988.
- Smith, Anna Marie. *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.
- Sommer, Doris. *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1991.
- Spencer, Jonathan, ed. *Sri Lanka: History and Roots of the Conflict*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Spurlin, William. "Broadening Postcolonial Studies/Decolonizing Queer Studies: Emerging 'Queer' Identities and Cultures in Southern Africa." In *Postcolonial, Queer*, edited by John C. Hawley, 185-206. Albany: SUNY P, 2001.
- Stacey, Jackie. "Promoting Normality: Section 28 and the Regulation of Sexuality." In *Off Centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies*, edited by Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury, and Jackie Stacey, 284-304. London: Unwin Hyman, 1991.
- Van der Veer, Peter. *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994.
- Vanita, Ruth. "Introduction." In *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, edited by Ruth Vanita, 1-11. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Vasudevan, Ravi. "Bombay and Its Publics." In *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*, edited by Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney, 186-211. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2001.
- Virdi, Jyotika. *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Films as Social History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2003.

- Weeks, Jeffrey. *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the Present*. London: Quartet, 1977.
- Wijesinha, Rajiva. *Current Crisis in Sri Lanka*. New Dehli: Navrang, 1986.
- Wilde, Oscar. *De Profundis: The Ballad of Reading Gaol and Other Writings*. London: Wordsworth Editions, 1999.
- Williamson, Judith. "Two Kinds of Otherness." In *Black Film, British Cinema: ICA Documents*, 23-25. London: British Film Institute, 1988.
- Wilson, A. Jeyaratnam. *The Break-Up of Sri Lanka: The Sinhalese-Tamil Conflict*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1988.
- Winterson, Jeanette. *Sexing the Cherry*. New York: Vintage, 1991.
- Yosef, Raz. "Homoland: Interracial Sex and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Israeli Cinema." *GLQ* 8, no. 4 (2002): 553-579.
- Young, Robert. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Yuen-Carrucan, Jasmine. "The Politics of Deepa Mehta's *Water*." *Bright Lights Film Journal* 28 (April 2000). <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/28/water.html>.

## Filmography

- Akomfrah, John. *Handsworth Songs*. Black Audio Collective, 1986. Videocassette.
- Chada, Gurinder. *Bend it Like Beckham*. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2002. DVD.
- \_\_\_\_. *Bhaji on the Beach*. First Look, 1993. Videocassette.
- Chopra, Vidhu. *1942: A Love Story*. Eros, 1993. DVD.
- Chopra, Yash. *Veer-Zaara*. Yash-Raj Films, 2004. DVD.
- Cuarón, Alfonso. *Y Tu Mamá También*. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2001. DVD.
- Dearden, Basil. *Victim*. Pathe-America Distribution, 1961. DVD.
- Färberböck, Max. *Aimee and Jaguar*. Zeitgeist Films, 1999. DVD.
- Frears, Stephen. *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Orion Classics, 1985. DVD.
- \_\_\_\_. *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. Cinecom, 1988. Videocassette.
- George, Terry. *Some Mother's Son*. Abbey Films, 1996. Videocassette.
- Gowariker, Ashutosh. *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India*. Eros, 2001. DVD.
- Greenaway, Peter. *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. Miramax, 1989. DVD.
- Greengrass, Paul. *Bloody Sunday*. Granada Television, 2002. DVD.
- Gustad, Kaizad. *Bombay Boys*. Kismet Talkies, 1998. Videocassette.
- Hudson, Hugh. *Chariots of Fire*. Warner Bros., 1981. DVD.
- Jarman, Derek. *Edward II*. BBC, 1991. Videocassette.
- \_\_\_\_. *The Last of England*. Film 4, 1987. Videocassette.
- Jones, Kirk. *Waking Ned Divine*. 20<sup>th</sup> Century, 1998. DVD.
- Jordan, Neil. *Angel*. Triumph Films, 1982. Videocassette.
- \_\_\_\_. *The Butcher Boy*. Warner Bros., 1998. Videocassette.

\_\_\_\_. *The Crying Game*. Miramax, 1992. DVD.

\_\_\_\_. *Michael Collins*. Warner Bros, 1996. DVD.

Julien, Isaac. *Looking for Langston*. Third World Newsreel, 1989. Videocassette.

\_\_\_\_. *The Passion of Remembrance*. Sankofa, 1986. Videocassette.

Khan, Mehboob. *Mother India*. Eros, 1957. DVD.

Kidron, Beeban. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. BBC, 1990. Videocassette.

Lang, Walter. *The King and I*. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1956. DVD.

Lean, David. *A Passage to India*. Columbia Pictures, 1984. DVD.

\_\_\_\_. *Ryan's Daughter*. MGM, 1971. Videocassette.

Lee, Ang. *The Wedding Banquet*. Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1993. DVD.

Lindsay-Hogg, Michael. *Brideshead Revisited*. Granada Television, 1981. DVD.

Macartney, Sydney. *A Love Divided*. BBC, 1999. DVD.

*Manor House*. Channel 4, 2002. DVD.

Mehta, Deepa. *Bollywood/Hollywood*. Mongrel Media, 2002. DVD.

\_\_\_\_. *Camilla*. Malofilm, 1994. Videocassette.

\_\_\_\_. *Earth/1947*. G<sup>2</sup>, 1998. DVD.

\_\_\_\_. *Fire*. Zeitgeist Films, 1996. DVD.

\_\_\_\_. *The Republic of Love*. Seville Pictures, 2003. Videocassette.

\_\_\_\_. *Water*. Mongrel Media, 2004. Film.

Michell, Roger. *Buddha of Suburbia*. BBC, 1994. Videocassette.

Mitchell, John Cameron. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. Killer Films, 2001. DVD.

Morahan, Christopher and Jim O'Brien. *Jewel in the Crown*. Granada Television, 1984. DVD.

Nair, Mira. *Mississippi Masala*. SCS Films, 1992. DVD.

O'Connor, Pat. *Cal*. Warner Bros., 1984. Videocassette.

Ove, Horace. *Playing Away*. Channel 4, 1987. Videocassette.

Prasad, Udayan. *My Son the Fanatic*. BBC, 1997. DVD.

Rashid, Ian Iqbal. *A Touch of Pink*. Mongrel Media, 2004. DVD.

Ratnam, Mani. *Bombay*. Amitabh Bachchan Corporation, 1995. DVD.

Razdan, Karan. *Girlfriend*. Eros, 2004. DVD.

Sagar, Ramanand. *The Ramayana*. Doordarshan, 1986. Videocassette.

Sen, Aparna. *Mr And Mrs Iyer*. Triplecorn Media, 2002. DVD.

Sheridan, Jim. *In the Name of the Father*. UIP, 1994. DVD.

Sheridan, Peter. *Borstal Boy*. Strand, 2000. DVD.

## VITA

Alexandra Lynn Barron was born in Brooklyn, New York on October 10, 1970, the daughter of Susan Evers and Eugene Barron. After completing her work at Stuyvesant High School in New York City in 1988, she entered The University of California at Santa Cruz. She received her Bachelor of Arts from The University of California at Santa Cruz in May 1993. During the following years she moved to Austin, Texas and worked in independent bookstores. In September 1996 she entered the Graduate School of The University of Texas.

Permanent Address: 3404 Randolph Road, Austin, Texas, 78722

This dissertation was typed by the author.