

Introduction

DEBOTRI DHAR

The idea for this book first occurred to me when I was a graduate student at Oxford University; and then again, a couple of years and another continent later, while teaching at Rutgers University in the United States. Why, I wondered, while watching the leaves change colour in the fall, were there very few serious yet engaging books on love, its many moods and multiple meanings? Just when I was considering taking a writing break to head to Kasauli, that misty, much-loved haunt in the Himalayas, life took me to teach at a liberal arts college in Ohio for a year. The cottages, rolling hills, and winding country roads in that part of America were not entirely unlike those in Kasauli in India, the horse- and-buggies of the Amish community adding an extra touch of Midwestern whimsy. But a full research and teaching schedule did mean that this book of essays—‘somewhat unusual,’ in the delightfully measured words of an editor—remained a dream. It was only after I started teaching at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor that various pieces of ‘the love book,’ as family and friends had fondly started referring to it, began to fall in place. A long gestation indeed...

This is a collection of twelve essays on love by scholars, critics, essayists, and journalists. Love: at once art, insight, event, encounter, aporia, utopia, ethic. In literature, culture, history, metaphysics, politics, and their interstices, ideas about love abound. Love has been a central mood and metaphor in fiction, poetry, and drama around the world: Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, or *Antony and Cleopatra*. Or *Gone with the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell's 1936 American novel that went on to be captured exquisitely on celluloid: Vivian Leigh and Clark Gable, love's lessons, love's loss, no less than a saga and no more than a light shrug—'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.' And how could we forget the many visions and revisions of love in Sanskrit classics such as Sudraka's play *Mrcchakatika* (The Little Clay Cart); and the fifth century poet Kalidasa's lyric poem *Meghduta* (The Cloud Messenger) which narrates how, in the wet, quivering season of *asadha*, a *yaksa* exiled in Ramagiri entreats a passing rain-cloud to carry his message of love to his beloved left behind in the ancient Indian city of Alaka?

In the first essay in this collection, 'Swayamvara, Arranged Marriage, and *Desi* Romance,' Malashri Lal offers some fascinating perspectives on 'Indian love,' mapping both continuity and change, possibility and paradox. Drawing from sources as diverse as epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* that continue to hold sway over the collective imagination, works of literature including those by women writers from the Indian diaspora in the United States, and Bollywood films, Lal asks if from ancient to modern times, the principle of a woman's choice in love and marriage has ever been entirely absent any more than it has ever been fully realized. Rather than

monolithically posit the ‘powerlessness’ of Indian women against the imperial-colonial assumption of ‘freedom’ of her Western counterpart, Lal’s essay thus draws our attention to the many diversities that constitute India’s spectrum—international designer wedding ensembles for the rich and child marriages among the very poor, the stark portrayals of love in a consumerist global media versus the textured layers of everyday life—to underscore the complexity, the ‘in-betweenness,’ the being and becoming of love.

We turn, then, to ‘divine love’ and its myriad depictions across literatures and cultures. The 1977 Australian classic, *Thornbirds* by Colleen McCullough, for instance, a complex tale of a man torn between his love of a woman and his love of Christ. Returning to the Indian context, Lal’s discussion of love and women’s choice in Indian epics, her brief invocation of Gandhi, and her critique of the imperial gaze overlap in intriguing ways with the second essay in the collection by Makarand Paranjape. Paranjape’s essay on immortal love focuses on the ‘lover-God’ Krishna and his consort Radha, ‘a milkmaid elevated to the status of the erotic and holy beloved of the Supreme Godhead.’

According to Paranjape, the extraordinary story of Radha must be read not just for itself, but in the larger context of Indian history, art, culture, and metaphysics. The male-dominated Hindu theology of Vaishnavism before Radha suffered from a Goddess-lack and this, Paranjape argues, is why the Vaishnava revival and even female-dominant Shaktism needed the love-Goddess Radha. Hardly mentioned in classical sources and scriptures such as the *Bhagavata Purana* but later assuming prominence in Jayadev’s *Gitagovinda*, Radha’s importance as Krishna’s chosen paramour, even spouse, steadily rises, her persona

being further moulded by poets like Chandidas, Vidyapati, and Surdas. Paranjape traces Radha's metamorphosis under the puritanical gaze of colonial modernity, and how her passionate dalliance with Krishna became an embarrassment to the agenda of political and social reform espoused by the proponents of Hindu respectability. Hence this essay's ultimate philosophical and provocative speculation: what would Radha say to Mahatma Gandhi, if she were suddenly to meet him as he was trying to rid himself of all sexual passions for the sake of society and polity?

The theme of the cultural erasure of sexuality through a resurgent respectability politics is carried forward in the next essay by Alka Pande, which re-engages with the Kamasutra through the eyes of the famed nayika and nagarvadhu of Pataliputra, Amrapali. Told in the voice of this powerful courtesan who, in desiring as well as being desired, chooses her men and 'lives her life independently, not subjugating herself to any man,' the essay gives us a postcolonial glimpse into an exquisitely imagined past, and even an unlikely foreshadowing of feminist futures.

In *A Lover's Discourse*, the French literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes also spoke of romantic love's artful un-anchoring, the language of lovers that punctures quotidian narratives tying us to social worlds, dulled times and spaces, to permit a gentle haemorrhage that makes anything possible.¹ Yet, love can be as much about passion as about power, about politics. In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, postcolonial feminist Chela Sandoval powerfully interrogated the narrative form of 'falling in love' and the predominance of a Western ethic of romantic love 'where love becomes law.'² Drawing from the work of those such as Barthes, Sandoval examined power, social and psychic

emancipation, a hermeneutic of love-as-consciousness.

So what about the trying, troubled, less-than-luminous shades of love? Barthes, too, had formulated love as that ‘place of life’ between narrative forms, ‘a marked and wounded space, a site of shifting.’³ Yes, love’s wounds can bleed profusely when they strike against law and life. Elsewhere I have written about the race and caste of love in the United States and India respectively, and how

[D]uring periods of racial segregation, there were laws penalizing ‘miscegenation’ or inbreeding between racial groups; and while much has changed, much has not. Interracial marriage—especially based on mutual respect rather than fetishization—is certainly more acceptable now, at least in some spaces, but it would be impossible to argue that it is the norm in America. This is similar to inter-caste love marriage in India; once considered taboo in orthodox circles, the stranglehold of caste norms may have weakened in some ways but remain as stubborn, as irresolute, in others. While writing my thesis that combined theoretical perspectives on education and empowerment with everyday manifestations in public culture, the latter including matrimonial advertisements in newspapers, it was saddening to see that the formal degrees of the educated did not always stop them from seeking a partner from the same caste. Marriage, in other words, has often functioned as a tool to enforce race and caste endogamy, to preserve the ‘purity’ of groups, and maintain hierarchy.⁴

The next two essays examine precisely such troubling aspects of the politics of love and desire. Christina Dhanaraj’s essay uses a Dalit feminist lens to shed light on the romantic experiences of Dalit women who have to

bear the double burden of caste and gender, not unlike the race and gender burden borne by women of colour in the West. Critiquing the savarna gaze of Indian cultural iconography for its stereotyping of Dalit identities on one hand, and elite feminist discussions of women's sexuality and sex positive cultural politics on the other, the essay highlights how liberal lifestyle alternatives practiced by mainstream Indian feminists who come from privileged social locations could potentially be more exploitative for Dalit women.

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay's essay examines love in the context of politicized religion: inter-faith love marriages in India, and the 'love-jihad' campaign. Love and jihad are incompatible words per se; but Mukhopadhyay traces how some members of Hindutva, Islamist, and other religious groups have used the two words, 'one after the other and in the same sequence, by treating the two as different parts of speech,' and as part of an insidious politics. Thus, Hindu men were exhorted to protect their culture and their women from the alleged Muslim 'love-jihadis', these allegations not just exerting a decisive impact on politics in north India, but whose rumbles have also been heard in some Muslim dominated districts of south India. Mukhopadhyay demonstrates how allegations of love jihad continue to be traded between various religious communities, with a Catholic Bishop recently alleging that Christian girls were being 'abducted by Love Jihad'—but this time by a Hindu outfit, to destroy 'Christian essence'. What has this patriarchal politics of love-jihad—'our' women, 'their' women—meant for the women whose bodies and religion it claims to protect?

This is the darker side of love, not just as it bestows life but as it bequeaths suffering. Yes, love can be a wound,

as seen also in suicide notes that testify not to love's joys but to how deception and violence in the name of love resulted in suicide, where God is invoked as the court of last resort, holding out indefinite punishment for a *sin*, in the language of faith, where secular courts could not be depended upon to award definite punishment for a *crime* in the language of law.⁵ And yet, while one's personal faith may offer both inspiration and consolation, organized religion's role in serving as an ideological and institutional means for controlling gendered bodies cannot be denied. For instance, the raped female body being framed as unchaste and irreversibly shamed has sometimes resulted in the ending of life itself. Elsewhere too, I have studied this dual relationship between feminism, faith, and love that might be read alongside the above two perspectives on religion by Paranjape and Mukhopadhyay.⁶ My work questioned why the antagonistic positing of feminism against religious faith—even *all* faiths—has to be the only solution for advocates of social justice. What about alternative theoretical, cultural, and lived interpretations of the question of faith and feminism, given that the global ubiquity of gender violence transcends the left-right and religious-secular divides, and exposes the limitations of both law and Western liberal theory? Instead, might we need a combination of just faith, just law, just love?

Love: more than pursuit, less than perfection. No collection of essays on love could possibly be complete without a tribute to the Urdu *ghazal* and its poetic rendering of love through the boudoirs and boulevards of time. Mehr Afshan Farooqi's essay studies Urdu poetry's famous exponent Mirza Ghalib and his ideas of the beloved: the beloved as dark-skinned ('her long hair is dark and dense,

and her body reflects the blackness of the tresses' such that the dark woman is presented as more enticing), as gendered or genderless, human or God. Farooqi traces the evolution of the *ghazal*, arguing that Ghalib's love for arcane Persian notwithstanding, the literary form and aesthetics of his poetry also displays very local colours and cultural characteristics, as seen in his delightful intermixing of tropes, linguistic juxtapositions, derivations from Sanskrit, and poetic imageries like that of an Indian beauty bathing in the rose garden and drying her hair among the Persian hyacinths.

Love, then, is both personal and political. The next essay by Zafar Anjum examines love in Urdu *shayari* beyond Ghalib and romance. Reminding us that Urdu poetry has many forms—*nazm*, *ghazal*, *qasida*, *masnavi*, *marsia* and *rubai*—the essay travels back in time, to early poets like Amir Khusro, Quli Qutub Shah and Wali, as well as forward, to Urdu poetry's 'last towering practitioner', Faiz Ahmed Faiz. In-between are the oeuvres of other poets such as Sauda, Mir, Ghalib, Daagh, Zauq, Hasrat, and Iqbal. Anjum thus pays obeisance to a long line of poets who dipped their flaming quills in both passion and politics, addressing larger themes such as empire, nationhood, Sufism, mass movements, modernity, and the market.

Alongside these expressions of love in and through 'high' culture—the classical, the textual, the urban, the masculine—counter cultures have also existed, and even thrived. Rakhshanda Jalil's essay explores the *barahmasa*—rural and oral songs for twelve months of the year, narrating the pain of separation from the beloved—and how it was counterpoised against the textuality and classicism of the *ghazal*. The essay also reminds us that though the

barahmasa as a genre emerges as a counter narrative in that it foregrounded women's voices, needs, and desires (*zenana boli*), it was ultimately written by male composers.

While the *barahmasa* did not have risqué jokes and ribald innuendo, unlike *rekhti* poetry, instead focusing on the *virahini* pining for her lover, would these idealized images of pining women be somewhat altered if women were allowed to be the authors of their own lives / loves rather than being imagined through the male gaze, howsoever sympathetic the latter might be?

Would the *gender* of love be different?

Barthes had said, 'The lover's fatal identity is precisely this: I am the one who waits.' But what is the gender of this 'I' of love's (in)decisions, love's choices, even love's waiting? My essay in this collection examines the relationship between love, waiting, and gender. As the essay argues, 'even a cursory glance at literatures, broadly defined to include fables, fairy-tales, literary and popular fiction, poetry and drama, reveals that traditionally, it was the woman who waited for the man—for the father, husband, and sons she loved—to return from work, or war, while tending lovingly to the home and hearth.' In literatures from around the world, including *bhasha* literatures from India, are there as many instances of men waiting for love when women leave? What forms might the leaving and waiting for love take today, with marriage being delayed or even rejected by women in order to pursue work, vocation, art? Can the self-love of single women also be seen as liberating, and a creative site of resistance?

Not surprisingly, these challenges for heterosexual love and its representations in literature, law and society have been compounded manifold when it comes to same-sex

love. In her sensitive essay on same-sex love in India, Parvati Sharma writes of private love, despair—and always, hope—against the public backdrop of the decades-old legal battle around Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. The essay draws on personal experience alongside literary writings on homosexuality, LGBTQ+ activist material, and judicial judgments, including the Supreme Court's recent progressive ruling on Section 377 and on privacy as a fundamental right. Privacy, for Sharma, is not just a postulate of law, or of bedrooms; she speaks, instead, of the privacy of ecstasy, and of the unsettling nature of 'love without the trappings that turn private ecstasy into social routine—marriage, family, children.' Sharma's essay, like others in the collection, ultimately alludes to the messy and paradoxical nature of romantic love itself, whose fluidity, sentimentality, and (il)logic cannot always be contained by the public-private and other neat binaries we variously inherit and inhabit.

And what if this illogic takes love's quest to unlikely, even if not unfamiliar, spaces? To trees, for instance, given the rich body of literature, including folktales, myths and metaphors, on romantic love between humans and trees? Sharanya Manivannan's prose-poem comes to mind here, with its opening line: I want a Boyfriend Like a Banyan Tree. 'A man who's a forest unto himself, with conspiracies of birds, and secret blossoms, and shaded places...And into this forest I will wander, a beloved of the world, and walk beneath the aegis of his boughs knowing that the same love that roots them raises me...I'll taste the rain from his bark and the wind from his stranglers and invent a susurrus language...I'll braid my hair into his and merge into his meditation, safe and gently swaying.'⁷

Sumana Roy's essay abandons the familiar rituals

of human love to enter this world of tree-love. There are advantages to wooing trees, we are told; trees hold no grudges, and provide a respite from the unending expectations of human lovers. But here too, the relationship must be inaugurated with a love letter, which implies ‘the invention of a new language, a new visual mimetic alphabet—the representation of trees through the shapes of their trunks and branches, new syntax, new grammar.’ Also, writing a declaration of love on paper seems embarrassing to Roy, for paper is made from trees; the equivalent would be using ‘human hide to write a love note to a lover.’ There are other challenges such as reciprocity, the foundation of romantic love. A desire to convert one-sided love for plants into a dialogue, Roy conjectures, was what made the biologist Jagadish Chandra Bose turn to science, comparing plant behaviour with the human heart and devising instruments to get plants to write their autobiographies, their own love letters. Here we also learn that Melbourne residents have been writing romantic letters to their favourite trees (‘You’re very pretty’ to an Algerian Oak, for instance), thereby gendering even their tree-lovers.

Whether between humans or with plants, the promise of love thus seems as socially constructed, and just as (im)possible. Didier Coste’s essay takes us through some city fictions of love, from Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* in Rouen, and Proust’s Swann and Odette, to Christina Stead’s *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Peter Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda*, through Buenos Aires with Ernesto Sábato, Istanbul with Orhan Pamuk, and Delhi with Khushwant Singh’s *Bhagmati*. For Coste, love and space are inseparable: ‘Whatever happens in Verona is conditioned by the street and the piazza, the existence or not of secret and secluded

places within walled city limits, balconies and dance halls, bedrooms with open doors and sacristies with closed ones.' Each city with its many lives, 'August's Rome and Nero's Rome, the Pope's Rome and Fellini's Roma,' can be 'anthropomorphized and even gendered...making it easier for the male gaze to fantasize its femininity, whether as a courtesan, a femme fatale, or a mother.' In undergoing constant metamorphosis, modern cities like Delhi thus become 'a parallel object of attachment, desire, nostalgia or repulsion, a rival for God and the rulers, a mirror of the beloved or an antagonist for the lover.' Hence, we are presented with an intriguing proposition, that 'the djinns, ghosts, nasty *bhoots* or the nicer elves haunt modern cities because there is nobody to feed them in the decrepit towers where the last locked-up princesses died of love-sickness and boredom when the first metro line opened in Delhi.'

Howsoever faintly we might hear echoes of the ancient in the modern, this much at least is true: the complex interrelationships of love and desire with time and space, with human, plant and the divine, and across law, literature and politics, do bring us back full circle, reminding us once again of the complexities, in-betweenness, the being and becoming of love.

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My vision for this book was to commission essays on a variety of engaging perspectives on love that could nevertheless be threaded into a collection. Some of the essays are more scholarly, and others more personal. While each essay is stand-alone such that the reader can begin anywhere rather than only at the beginning, some may also be read together. For instance, Makarand Paranjape's

essay on divine love and Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay's on 'love jihad' both engage, albeit in very different ways, with the intersections of love and religion; Mehr Farooqi's and Zafar Anjum's essays are on various shades of love in Urdu poetry; and Rakhshanda Jalil's essay on the Barahmasa, Parvati Sharma's essay on same-sex love, and mine on single women, self-love, and the gender of waiting, each examines different aspects of love and gender. Most of the essays have an Indian and Subcontinental focus; however, given my own journey, as well as how regional insularities can prove counter-productive beyond a point, I have attempted to ensure that the volume as a whole is also in conversation with 'Western' and transnational ideas and discourses.

Then, a troubling thought: can we speak of love without also speaking of war? Is war love's nemesis, its opponent and archrival, or merely another heightened shade and unseemly shadow of love? Here one is reminded of the book *Righteous Republic's* juxtaposition of Rabindranath Tagore and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, two Indian novelists and political thinkers who were utterly unlike each other in their approaches to love.⁸ The book posits how Rabindranath the internationalist flatly opposed the telos of the nation-state, his romantic imagination 'devoid of the facticity and fatality of war', but that war was important to Bankim, whose god was the warrior-statesman Krishna rather than the cowherd-lover Krishna, his battle cry 'Bande Mataram' and his imagined community excluding the Other; and yet, the author argues, Rabindranath and Bankim 'both make Bengal, they both love Bengal.'⁹ Would our collection have benefited from an insightful essay on war, perhaps drawing from work such as that of Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa to frame love/war as *la frontera*, a crossroads, a

suturing together of ruptured histories, memory, fences and barbed wires?¹⁰ Or is it just as well that a collection on love ultimately has no essay on war?

Whatever may be its limitations for now, one hopes that this book will have much to offer its audience. As the curator and volume editor, it has already given me enough to think through—especially when I have found myself agreeing or disagreeing with this or that argument—along with also bringing incredible joys and eccentric pleasures.

The essays on Urdu poetry, for instance, rekindled ancient memories of Ghalib and Faiz, tomes pulled out of dusty shelves in remembrance of old promises, the dawns and dusks in different parts of the world made more beautiful through poetry. Snacking on fruit and cheese at an American eatery in Ann Arbor while reading Farooqi's interpretations of the Indic-Persian crossovers in Mirza Ghalib's oeuvre, the essay's highlighting of an intriguing poetic twist—the word *tale* (below) derived from the Sanskrit *tal* in Ghalib's '*radif ke tale*'—made me swallow an indignant olive in delight. Afterwards, walking home from the library on a snowy evening, down Liberty Street and through the colorful shops of Nickel's Arcade, the mind replayed many such literary and linguistic juxtapositions on love acquired over the years, whether Amir Khusro's exquisite romantic coupling of Persian and Sanskrit in '*Zihale maskeen makun taghaful duraye naina banaye batiyaan / sakhi piya ko jo main na dekhun, toh kaise kaatoon andheri ratiyaan,*' or that old Hindi film number on love with Amitabh Bachhan and Zeenat Aman rowing across gliding waters: '*amore mio dove stai tu sto cercando, sei solo mio amore mio / do lafzon ki hai dil ki kahaani...*' Paranjape's musings on divine love brought me face-to-face, for the millionth time, with Radha, whom I have often written about, whether as

academic engagement or as fictional reinterpretation. And Coste's essay travelling through Sydney, Pompeii, Buenos Aires, Istanbul, and Delhi reminded me of my own journeys, its ruminations on love and the city making me see old spaces with new eyes, the silent serenades of present and absent lovers, elves under awnings and *bhoots* peeking out of manholes, truly a return of the repressed.

No, the world is not a 'global village'—the politics undergirding that kind of Universalist, homogenizing fantasy, and the discourses of love historically conditioned only by Western, white and imperialist brands of humanism, will forever remain suspect—and cultures can often be opaque to outsiders. But neither can our world be reductively reduced to discrete entities entirely impervious to travel, encounter, dialogue, love. How fascinating to think that the first time I had *mehndi* applied on my palms was not in India but in America, its dark, beautiful stains a testimony to our intersecting worlds, their mutating geographies and constantly colliding histories. It is to those intersections that the book is dedicated.

I dedicate this book, also, to its contributors and readers. For Renuka Chatterjee of Speaking Tiger Books and for Tahira Thapar's inputs; the fellowship provided by Michigan's Center for the Education of Women, and for the Center's supportive ex-Director Dr. Gloria Thomas; for the University of Michigan's Women's Studies program and our students; for my family, always; and for anyone who has contributed their ideas and affection to this book, from around the globe, my gratitude and much love.

Dr. Debotri Dhar
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