"The secret is that the secret changes":

Sex and Taboo in India and Indian Young Adult Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream film and media in India offer children and young adults sexually explicit, misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic content. At the same time, Indian lawmakers oppose the need for sex education in schools – a dichotomy that exposes a deep-rooted taboo regarding sex and sexuality education and potentially perpetuates situations like the spates of gruesome rapes and child sexual abuse across the country in the last decade. To examine this paradox and its effects, this article offers close readings of several contemporary young adult novels: *Mayil Will Not be Quiet!* (Subramaniam and Rajendran, 2008), *Mostly Madly Mayil* (Subramaniam and Rajendran, 2013), *This is Me, Mayil* (Subramaniam and Rajendran, 2018), *Talking of Muskaan* (Sankar, 2014) and *The Lies We Tell* (Sankar, 2019). This article argues that these novels serve as a form of rebellion against prevalent taboos regarding sex and sexuality in India. With slut-shaming, revenge porn and blackmail, online abuse, and consent predominant themes in these books, they also represent a subversive mode of sexuality education to their young adult readers. Reading these YA texts against the definitions and development of prejudices about sex and sexuality across Indian history and

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culture, this article explores the detrimental effects of the persistent taboo of sex among Indian youth – seen particularly in the lack of sex education for young adults – which this article reads as an act of exerting power to control the private lives and personal choices of minors.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the representations of sex and sexuality in several contemporary Indian young adult novels, which, I argue, boldly explore these controversial topics in the face of persistent taboos in Indian society. A selection of YA novels that depict issues of sex and sexuality among Indian youth are studied – Himanjali Sankar's *Talking of Muskaan* (2014) and *The Lies We Tell* (2019), and Nivedita Subramaniam and Sowmya Rajendran's three *Mayil* books (*Mayil Will Not Be Quiet!* [2011], *Mostly Madly Mayil* [2013], and *This is Me, Mayil* [2018]). I read these texts as a subversive mode of resistance against the gatekeeping adult; providing meaningful and informative discussions about sex with children in a country where sex education is informal and at the discretion of schools.

The novels selected address aspects of homosexuality and female sexuality among urban Indian youth and the issues they co-exist with, such as slut-shaming, revenge porn, sexual harassment, and homophobic legal and educational systems; as well as exploring the power politics that exist behind the common desire to control sexuality, its expressions, and identities. The first part of this article provides a historical and critical outline of how sexuality has been understood in Indian history and brings to the fore the lasting effects of India's colonial past in its configurations of sex and sexuality. In the second and third sections, I analyze the aformentioned novels and argue that they challenge the biases that continue to mark contemporary urban Indian society.

SEX EDUCATION IN INDIA

Michel Foucault writes, "[w]hat is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the* secret" (35). Controversies surrounding sexuality and sexual orientation frequently erupt in India along these theoretical lines. The country suffers from the strange dichotomy of desiring to control personal and private expressions of sexuality by outright refusing to discuss it in meaningful conversations, suggesting that "it is not in our Indian culture" (Chakravarti 390, 395; Sengupta n.p.), while at the same time, portraying and promoting rape culture through regressive mainstream media, especially

obscene 'item numbers'[1] such as "Munni Badnaam Hui" and "Fevicol Se" from the first two *Dabangg* films (2010, 2012).[2] The groups most frequently affected by this paradox are children and young adults, who face exposure to explicit content through the cinema or the Internet, usually without any educational guidance on sex and sexuality from adults in their life. For children and adolescents in poverty-ridden slums, sex is a semi-private act that they are exposed to from an early age, as both Kabita Chakraborty (12) and Pankaj Butalia (65) note. Incidents like the horrific Kathua rape case (2018), in which an eight-year-old child was gangraped and murdered, happen alongside the Bois Locker Room controversy in Delhi (2020) where private WhatsApp group chats of teenage boys as young as 13 from wealthy private schools were leaked, exposing their usage of sexist slurs and plans to gangrape specific girls in their class (*India Today*, "Bois Locker Room" n.p.). At the same time, parents refuse to talk to their children about sex, consent, or questions of sexual orientation, as they feel such conversations will corrupt their innocent offspring. Curious youth consequently learn about these topics through hearsay from friends or the media accessed and consumed. As Butalia writes in *Dark Room: Child Sexuality in India*, creating taboos around matters such as sex only creates underground sources of knowledge and hinders children and adolescents from seeking frank discussions with trusted adults in their lives, even regarding the trauma of their own abuse, if any (xi).

Regulated and formalized sex education requires a teaching body who are trained to teach on this topic with sensitivity. It also carries its own dangers, particularly when political affiliations influence the construction of syllabi. Enforcing the politically approved version of sexuality in Indian culture may cause more harm than good, especially to vulnerable children and women who come from disadvantaged situations of poverty and/or orthodox, religious, conservative families. In privileged spaces too, where teachers might have the necessary sensitization training, sex education may be reduced to a perfunctory and occasional instruction topic, as I discuss in reference to *Talking of Muskaan* and the *Mayil* books later in the article.

Every time the Indian Government has planned to implement sex education in the school curriculum, it has been vehemently opposed by conservative groups and parents alike (*India Today* "No Need" n.p.; News18 n.p.; Krishna n.p.), particularly those who claim associations with religious fundamentalist groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The National Adolescent Education Program (AEP) proposed in 2005 (McManus and Dhar 4) by the Ministry of Human Resource and Development along with the National AIDS Control Organisation (Chakravarti 390) was first introduced in central government run schools and thereafter across the country. The AEP was to include sex education, but

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1   The item number is generally defined as a song with sexually explicit lyrics in which a woman suggestively dances among throngs of men.

2   Song-and-dance numbers in commercial movies from the Indian film industry, irrespective of region, with sexually explicit lyrics and suggestive choreography.

discussions of homosexuality, safe sex, and consent have faced fierce opposition from politicians, parents, and, often, students (O'Sullivan et al. 6, 8; Kumar et al. 3). Sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and the reproductive system form part of the high school biology syllabi, but there is no uniform model of sex education in schools throughout the country. As multiple independent surveys and articles on sex and sexuality among young adult groups in India have noted, the AEC faced outright bans from multiple states across India (Chakravarti 390; Venkatraman n.p.; McManus and Dhar 4; O'Sullivan et al. 2). The consistent criticism is that it does not align with Indian culture and will encourage teenagers to engage in sexual activity (Chakraborty 16; McManus and Dhar 4; *India Today* n.p.; Reeve n.p.). As Paromita Chakravarti explains, it was also considered to be a pharmaceutical conspiracy to increase sales of condoms and compared to the licentiousness of the West (390). Moreover, despite the Indian Supreme Court declaring the references to homosexuality in Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 2018 unconstitutional, LGBTQ+ people continue to face discrimination within the country (India Today n.p.; Shalini n.p.). A misalignment with Indian culture is similarly perceived to explain this, with many believing it to be a Western import (Chakravarti 390; Vanita and Kidwai xxiii-xxiv).

SEXUALITY AND 'INDIAN CULTURE'

So what is Indian culture, particularly when it comes to its expressions and endorsements of sexuality? From evidence of erotic temple art that adorns several ancient temples throughout India (Banerjee 159) to tenets of religious groups, such as the far-right Hindutva Sangh Parivar,[3] who believe in stringent gender roles enforced by the patriarchy, it is something built upon a dynamic and fluid history, comprising centuries of epochs and cultural movements by peoples of many religious identities and beliefs.

In *Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought* (2020), Durba Mitra undertakes an extensive archival study of the development of social systems in colonial India, which she argues is the basis of conservative definitions of Indian culture. These systems revolve around the control of female sexuality as seen through the figure of the 'prostitute'. Mitra demonstrates how the female body was configured through philology, law, forensic medicine, ethnology, and fiction, as an object whose potential for dangerous sexuality was to be controlled by the sexually restrained man for the progressive evolution of Indian society. This was theorized to reach its full potential by progressing from "primitive promiscuity" (31, 38, 57, 141, 158, 172) present in the threat and form of female sexuality, to the state of conjugal, patriarchal, monogamous marriage where men would be active and the

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3   In a nutshell, Hindutva refers to an extremist form of Hinduism which seeks to promote and ensure a culturally and religiously homogenised, Hindu dominated subcontinent. It is the ideology of the Sangh Parivar which includes the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party, India's ruling party since 2014.

women submissive, allowing the men to evolve into productive members of society (161). Mitra studies texts written by influential thinkers and sociologists between 1840-1960, tracing the rigid position of these intellectuals and colonial officials who repeatedly argue that all women who exist outside the monogamous, conjugal home controlled by the patriarchal husband are 'prostitutes'. [4]

Mitra notes that colonial philologists, sociologists, and officials would base their readings and conclusions on the premodern Sanskrit texts of the *Manusmriti*, the *Arthashastra* and the *Kamasutra*, all three of which form the basis of Hindu law in India (25). Alongside these, the epics – *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* – were influential, especially the story of Swetaketu from the *Mahabharata*.[5] The philological, ethological, medical, and literary all interact with the laws passed by the colonial State to control female sexuality, such as the Contagious Diseases Act 1868 (CDA) which empowered the police to force women to register as prostitutes and submit to a genital exam twice a month in a bid to control the spread of STDs (Mitra 78, 125). Though the CDA was repealed in 1888, the Indian Penal Code continued to exert control over female sexuality through provisions in Chapter 16. Mitra notes:

> These laws controlled a diverse range of social behaviour through the classification and criminalization of women's sexual behaviour. [...] [M]en's sexual practices remained almost entirely outside the formal purview of the state, with the notable exception of the provision against sodomy in section 377, which was primarily used in practice to regulate gender non-normative people in the colonial period. (69)

Mitra's study is particularly applicable to the texts I discuss in the third section of this article, where the female body becomes a sight of exploitation and control by both male characters and state institutions such as the school.

Section 377 of the IPC, which was based on the Buggery Act of 1533, was eventually modified to decriminalize homosexuality in 2018,[6] the order referring to Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's ground-breaking text *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (2000) in the judgement. Vanita and Kidwai highlight the inclusivity and tolerance of sex, sexuality, and the non-pejorative attitude towards same-sex love fostered by the Vedic

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4   I use the word 'prostitute' here as Mitra uses it in her study where she draws upon the definitions and usage of the term in the colonial, Raj period documents and literature she examines. The term, in this context, includes not just the sex worker but all unmarried, menstruating women in India.

5   Versions of the story differ on the particulars, but all agree that on seeing his mother with another man, innocently or otherwise, young Swetaketu got so angry he declared that no woman shall cohabit with a man not her husband and that started the practice of monogamy.

6   The Supreme Court judgement of 2018 was a reassessment of their 2013 judgement overturning the Delhi High Court judgement decriminalising homosexuality in 2009.

texts and, later, Bhakti and Sufi poets. They note how Vatsayana's *Kamasutra* advocates the importance of pleasure over procreation and a tolerant attitude to the sexual choices of an individual – "*Sutra 36* describes as *sadharana* [ordinary] a mutual act of oral sex performed by two male friends on one another" (Vanita and Kidwai 52) – later indicating that this aspect was excised out in Madhavacharya's translation of 1911, which was "clearly influenced by Victorian campaigns for sexual purity" (197). Vanita and Kidwai argue that sexual puritanism and homophobia in India gained strength under the British Raj, and continue to be driving forces of "Indian culture" (96). This is seen especially in same-sex colonial schools across the country where surveillance is a norm (Kaul 164; Butalia 56). It echoes Foucault's theorization of the workings of sex within the context of Victorian puritanism across much of Europe:

> Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule. The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law. The couple imposed itself as model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy. (3)

This perspective draws the lines of influence of Victorian puritanical thought upon colonial configurations of sexual propriety as Indian scholars bid to depict colonial India as a nation aspiring to be as socially progressive as the British metropole. Hence, the once tolerant attitude of ancient and medieval India mutated to a harsh, punitive intolerance where rape, honour killings, lynching, abuse, and violence became tools to repress and oppress socially unaccepted expressions of love and sexuality. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code is the direct remnant of Raj legacy, and the criminalization of homosexuality in India reflects the fact that "older indigenous discourses of same-sex love and romantic friendship came into dialog with the new Western legal and medical discourses of homosexuality as an abnormality or an illness" (Vanita and Kidwai 196).

The novels examined in the rest of this article are all set in urban spaces, highlighting how the discourse surrounding sex and sexuality occurs greatly in urban centres, led by those with the privilege to access and take forward these conversations. "My father laughed and said all these things do not touch our lives, homosexuality and the laws on it" notes Subhojoy in *Talking of Muskaan* (126), and indeed when one is preoccupied trying to find one's next meal to survive, the concerns of sexual freedom seem irrelevant. Interestingly enough, the *Kamasutra* is also aimed at the city-dweller (Vanita and Kidwai 47), hinting at the enduring liberal mores of urban spaces. That does not, however, mean that they are solely liberal and progressive. As this article demonstrates in the next two sections, punitive repression and control of sexuality co-exist with liberality, be that through controlling female sexuality or non-heteronormativity.

FEMALE SEXUALITY AND PATRIARCHAL POWER

In *Indian Sex Life*, Mitra discusses the establishment of forensic medicine in India in light of the Indian Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code 1861, followed by the Indian Evidence Act 1872, which necessitated the presentation of medical evidence and became the justification for conducting post-mortems on a woman's body to find proof of abortion. Just as the Contagious Diseases Act had legalized the forced genital examination of a woman (125), these laws further discredited a woman's right to consent by violating her body in death to prove empirical points of sexual perversion and promiscuity in Indian women to the colonial State. In several cases Mitra quotes, the circumstance of the woman's death was always her fault; in no situation, including rape, was she innocent: she was presumed to be deviant from the beginning, proven by the scars and blood clots of her uterus and the quality of her hymen. For example, Mitra writes about the case of a ten-year-old rape victim:

> the narrative of the case study seems to do little except to objectify the violence inflicted on the body [...]. They provided evocative details of the body, where the appearance, texture, and comparison of women's genitalia—from the state of the hymen to bodily injuries—appear as exemplary of a generalizable truth about Indian social practice. (114)

The Indian girl or woman is powerless against the male gaze, which would have her literally reduced to body parts for study to confirm its assumption of female sexual deviance. Where it could not confirm her deviance and criminality in life, it does so in her death.

While the novels in the analysis that follows – Sankar's *The Lies We Tell* and Subramaniam and Rajendran's *Mayil* Books – do not enact these gruesome details, the patriarchal male gaze shapes much of the narratives, as the male characters either enact gender violence on women or the female narrator has violence enacted upon her. This violence is compounded by the role of schools in policing sex and sexuality, acting as gatekeepers and censors alongside families and the law.

THE LIES WE TELL

Sankar creates ordinary teenage characters in an urban setting to explore the exploitation of confession and consent in her novel, *The Lies We Tell*. The novel begins with the 26/11 terrorist attack in Mumbai and ends with the 2014 school shooting in Peshawar, placing it firmly within an undeniable, unavoidable history. Here, the 17-year-old narrator, Irfan, falls into depression after his girlfriend breaks up with him, during which time an intimate photo of her is leaked to the class. As her ex-boyfriend, he is suspected of having leaked it in an act

of revenge porn. This violation of consent allows the novel to explore a controversial aspect of sex education according to surveys: sexual harassment and cyber-crime (O'Sullivan et al. 6, 11; McManus and Dhar n.p.).

The overarching storyline is Irfan's descent into depression and hallucinations of his deceased older sister after his break-up with his childhood friend Uma, who cheated on him with his best friend, Rishi. Within the narrative, female sexuality becomes the space for conquest and casualty as men jostle for power. Rishi's mother commits suicide after decades of domestic violence and Irfan's sister Sanya dies in the 26/11 terrorist attack in Mumbai. Sanya's death comes shortly after she is found in a tryst with her boyfriend by her mother (Sankar 6, 69). This juxtaposition hints at the closeted nature of young adult relationships necessitated by a society which seeks to control expressions of female sexual desire and awareness through taboo. Irfan, repressing his grief, rationalizes her absence as her desire to escape their stifling, patriarchal family by going to the UK for college, creating false memories and tethering her to him by his confessional emails, as her spectre encourages him to violate Uma's privacy and eventually attempt suicide outside Uma's house.

Indian YA does not explicitly depict the sexual act, for even with greater sexual liberation in the last decade, certain socially accepted lines remain uncrossable to avoid bans and censorship. Irfan only ever mentions kissing Uma until, after the break-up, he masturbates to intimate pictures of her taken when they were together and saved in a hidden folder in his laptop:

> What washed over me though was infinite longing. I went to the bathroom. When I came out, I shut the album without another glance. I couldn't get myself to delete it. I felt disgust. At myself, at Uma. I felt like a voyeur who had been peeping through a keyhole even though those photographs belonged to me, taken by Uma for my eyes only. The photographs still belonged to me, frozen in a time when Uma was mine too. (56)

The novel asks questions about the ethics of retaining sexual photographs of an ex-partner. Irfan feels like a voyeur because he is one, claiming ownership over the body of a woman who has withdrawn her consent by breaking up with him. The photographs may have been taken for him, but they are of Uma and he violates her consent with the intention to judge and criticize her body to feel better about himself (56). Irfan's failure to delete the folder leads to the next violation of her consent: Rishi hacks into Irfan's computer and leaks that particular picture to their classmates, trying to pin the blame on Irfan.

Rishi is depicted as jealous and insecure, intent on destroying Irfan's reputation to make Uma hate him. Constantly feeling that Uma still cares for Irfan, he tries to control and conquer her body this way, violating Irfan's privacy by hacking into his computer (137), and Uma's by firstly viewing and sharing intimate content which had been a private exchange

between two other people, and then by trying to gaslight her into blaming Irfan (78-79). Rishi's control continues until he hits her, as he has watched his father hit his mother, and she breaks up with him (120). When he does confess to Uma, after his mother's death, he continues to frame it as her fault for caring for Irfan and victimising himself, his remorse seeming forced (137-138). Feeling powerless at home (6), Rishi attempts to wield perverse power over his two best friends. Irfan, on the other hand, directs his anger at himself first for his weakness in being slave to Uma's whims and desires (50), instead of being a masculine, powerful "man" (7, 51), then gradually re-directing it to Uma, who he portrays as a siren-figure (67) as the narrative progresses. Both Irfan and Rishi enact the stances held by the intellectuals and colonial officials Mitra studies: in their minds the fault is not theirs, it is Uma's very presence and her expression of her sexuality in a private space that has tempted them.

Uma, too, thinks Irfan is behind the leaked photographs, but when the authorities get involved, she does not name him, humiliated and embarrassed though she is (78). The focus of the narrative is not on her however, and Sankar implicitly depicts how women are often pawns in a patriarchal society like India, where their bodies are policed, controlled, and violated as a means to an end. Irfan and Rishi repeatedly refer to Uma in terms of her "sexiness" throughout the novel, mentioning her "sexy little dress" (48, 51), seeing her as an object on display rather than a person. Irfan also objectifies Uma suggesting that she herself leaked the image to get attention, neither horrified nor angry that "every boy in the XIIth standard had possibly enjoyed wanking off to Uma's photo" (68). As Uma was the only one with another copy of the photo, Irfan thinks she circulated it (67) and he calls her an "actress" when he hears she is "hysterical" (68), evoking stereotypical notions of hysteria and pretense. Rishi first tells her to forget about the incident in an uncharacteristic bout of non-reaction (65), then pushes her to accept it was leaked by Irfan, blaming her for still refusing to indict him. As Uma is viewed entirely through the eyes of an unreliable narrator, in this powerplay between two boys she is reduced to just a body marked by her potential to satisfy the male gaze, as women are on the forensic table in Mitra's analysis. Sex, violence, and the invasion of privacy become tools to control and manipulate female sexual agency in this novel, whether it through Uma's violation of consent or Sanya being deprived of peace even in her death by her brother. Its timeline marked by events in India's contemporary history, what happens to the women and girls in *The Lies We Tell* becomes representative of the experience of young adult women in India at large, whose trauma repeats endlessly.

Working with Muslim girls in Kolkata slums, Chakraborty writes about the policing of women's bodies to maintain honour through slander:

As one prominent male elder explained to me, a woman's sexuality 'needs to be controlled so she could give her virginity as a "gift" in her marriage'. He understood

that the community plays an important role in helping her achieve this by using violence, gossip and slander to 'keep her in line'. (15)

By putting the responsibility of maintaining family *izzat* (honour/respect/integrity) on the women, boys and men are free to violate consent, deploying fear and shame to control a woman's sexuality to fulfil their own pleasure, with women themselves often acting as agents (2). Though the female body is seen to exist for male pleasure, she is still the 'slut' if she has been molested, abused, and raped, and through no fault of her own, that is the guilt and shame she must bear. As chronicled by Mitra, women of all castes and classes bear the potential to be 'prostitutes' and the perpetrators of their own violent ends by just existing and this situation is explored and exposed in *The Lies We Tell* and, as we will now see, the *Mayil* books by Subramaniam and Rajendran.

THE *MAYIL* BOOKS

The Mayil books – *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet*, *Mostly Madly Mayil*, and *This is Me, Mayil* – are written in the form of journals kept by Mayil Ganeshan at the ages of 12, 13, and 17. As such, the books document her journey as an adolescent and her experiences with periods, sexual harassment, slut-shaming, masturbation, homosexuality, policing of sexuality at school and at home, and abusive domestic relationships, all of which together advocate for the need for comprehensive and sensitive sex education in schools, instead of leaving it to the parents.

Uma's experience of consent violation in *The Lies We Tell* is comparable to a storyline with Mayil's best friend Krishna (Ki) in *This is Me, Mayil*. Ki's college student ex-boyfriend threatens to release explicit photographs – Photoshopped, as Mayil discovers – if Ki does not get back together with him. Out of shame and fear, Ki considers complying and it is not till Mayil intervenes, by involving her godmother that he is taken to task, though his mother tries to defend him citing his potentially ruined future (Subramaniam and Rajendran, *This is Me, Mayil* 48). Until that time, Ki undergoes severe psychological stress, similar to her experience as a 14-year-old in *Mostly, Madly Mayil*, when a male cousin would regularly sexually harass her. At the same time, Mayil has been sexually harassed near her house by grown men. Both girls keep quiet from shame and fear – of what their parents and society would say. Ki had, in fact, told her abuser's sister who had

> just said guys are like that and that every day, when she goes to office on the bus, some guy or the other touches her like that. It seems she said Ki shouldn't tell anyone because everyone will just think she's shameless for talking about things like this. (Subramaniam and Rajendran, *Mostly Madly Mayil* 48)

Arunima Chanda points to "the helpless state that girls on the brink of maturity go through when faced with such situations. In most cases, confiding in an adult becomes the worst decision as they try to dust the matter under the mat or disbelieve the victim" (125). In the *Mayil* novels, the authors can be understood to call attention to the fact that in most cases of child sexual abuse, the abuser is a relative and that the culture of shame of being sexually abused means the victim is silenced by fear of punitive repercussion. Mayil has someone to turn to, but in real life many children are not so lucky. This normalization of sexual abuse of minors and women is reflected in several of the personal narratives that make up *Dark Room*, especially "Elizabeth's Tale" and the dialogue Elizabeth has with her mother after her uncle starts molesting her. As Nilofer Kaul reflects in the Afterword, this wielding of shame and fear encourages silence and repression, preventing a challenge to existing patriarchal power structures, which in turns leads to severe trauma in the abused child. The journal format of the *Mayil* series allows the eponymous character to undermine social judgement of her confessions at once private and public and also depict how sexual curiosity, as well as sexual abuse, are woven into daily life. The journal provides her with an outlet to record and process her trauma and, most importantly, it un-silences not just her voice, but others like her, uncovering issues which adult, patriarchal society would rather have silenced. The challenge is in the very name of the first book: *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet!*

The punitive silencing of sexuality by authoritative figures preoccupies much of the series. In *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet!*, 13-year-old Mayil, thinking about having to kiss a classmate, talks about the scandal caused by two seniors who were caught kissing at school. The boy was expelled, and the girl cried herself out of punishment (Subramaniam and Rajendran, *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet!* 92). Mayil writes about this, hoping that her parents never find out she knows about sex, fearing their reaction, in an indictment of a system which believes in making taboo a natural process and then harshly sanctioning innocent explorations of the so-called 'secret'. This sanctioning goes a step further when the privacy of two 15-year-old characters is breached by the school in *Mostly Madly Mayil*. The characters break school rules by using a phone in the school building and having a dalliance in the school washrooms, but neither of those misdemeanors justifies the teacher looking through the phone to find the video of the encounter: "Ki wanted to know why the teacher was looking at Kamal Raj's videos in the first place. She thought it pretty snoopy. I think so too" (Subramaniam and Rajendran, *Mostly Madly Mayil* 104). In the novel, the school breaches the privacy of a minor and punishes a consensual act by suspending the two teens involved, issuing a cell phone ban throughout the school without offering explanations to parents or students. Mayil and her friends only know because they heard it through the grapevine, but the imposition of the ban is a collective punishment upon the entire student body. The teacher, who breaks trust and violates the privacy of a minor faces no repercussion, exemplifying Foucauldian notions of legitimate sexual policing within institutions such as schools (Foucault 47).

With information censored through shaming by parents and schools, Mayil's friend Jyothy gets all her information from Bollywood movies, which Chakraborty suggests are the main sources of sex education and romance experience for the girls in Kolkata slums (8), along with pornographic films (12). Butalia reiterates this in several stories in *Dark Room*, where the narrators recount imitating sexually implicit scenes from Bollywood movies in their early explorations of same-sex or heterosexual relationships. This is also echoed by Parul Jain et al., who note that in the absence of formalized sex education, children and young adults turn to cinema and/or pornography to learn about taboos surrounding sex and sexuality (20). Hence, the sexually curious but underinformed Jyothy mistakes kissing for sex, smugly telling Mayil and Ki that "she had done it" (Subramaniam and Rajendran, *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet!* 54).

The impact of Bollywood and South Indian Cinema in promoting rape culture is mentioned in *This is Me, Mayil*, when Mayil recalls watching a film with her younger brother Thamarai and her grandfather Thatha. In the film, the lead actor makes sexist comments about the heroine (14), representing the role the male gaze plays in defining the existence of a woman. The male gaze in Bollywood is particularly evident in item numbers, which are so popular that even children re-enact them (Deshpande, 6). The woman is frequently objectified as food (Deshpande 'Abstract'; Choudhury 223; Jain et al. 16), referred to as an item girl, and reduced to an object (Deshpande 19) and/or fragmented body parts (Jain et al. 20). Ketaki Deshpande argues that the figure of the item girl is feminist because she benefits monetarily from the dance and controls the gaze directed at her (30), but the hypersexual nature of the item song has also been interpreted as a gang-rape fantasy (50). Bollywood films are often understood to normalize a disregard for consent and endorse dangerous behaviours, such as stalking, in the name of romance (Choudhury 223), the effects of which are enacted on Ki in the *Mayil* books.

Subramanian and Rajendran also include mentions of *Game of Thrones* (93) to hint at the normalization of sexual violence through the American television programming that is consumed by the semi-educated, but curious, urban adolescent.[7] Cautious around the adults in their lives when it comes to such discussions for fear of punishment and shame, the characters turn to American and Indian mainstream media with toxic and graphic sexual violence as their sources of information, along with other avenues on the Internet. That the authors include these references as commonplace in Mayil's daily life, rather than focusing on and problematizing them, speaks to the commonplace nature of such media in the lives of young adults.

Thamarai is caught watching porn in *This is Me, Mayil*, an incident that the authors use to provide a miniature sex education lesson to the implied readers through the parents

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7   Also echoed by Shalini Advani in the Introduction to *Dark Room: Child Sexuality in India*, where she talks about American teen dramas as sexually aware and negatively educational for the Indian young adult (xxxv).

having a talk with Mayil and her brother. Mayil, at 17, is depicted as already familiar with most of the information given but she notes it down, nonetheless. Arguably, the authors use the journal format of the series to spread awareness of healthy sex-related practices, while at the same time calling out parents who evade responsibility: "[i]f it was all completely normal, why were we TALKING about it? Couldn't they just pretend nothing was happening? Like regular parents? (113). Mayil's mother is a contradiction due to her selective feminism. She has frank discussions with her daughter about puberty and sexuality, but also evades sensitive questions. Hence, in lieu of a discussion (Chanda 123), she leaves women's magazines around for 13-year-old Mayil to read. She once calls out Mayil for assuming a bikini-clad woman was a "prostitute" (Subramaniam and Rajendran, *Mostly Madly Mayil* 61), yet when they met a member of the *hijra*[8] community on the train, all she says is, "some men just like to pretend they were women" (Subramaniam and Rajendran, *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet!* 15) and accuses them of monetary extortion (17), pretending to sleep through the rest of Mayil's questions. The latter incident is one of the few depictions of trans people in YA fiction in India, and Amma's response speaks of deeply rooted internalized transphobia. The unnaturalness of transphobia is highlighted through Mayil's confusion regarding people laughing at trans-coded characters in films and avoiding them in person. She also recognizes the falsity of her mother's explanation, understanding that this is different from tomboys through her reading of the *Famous Five* books: "[b]ut this was different. I don't know how but it was. Amma said I'd understand when I became older and closed her eyes like she was sleeping [...]. But why can't I know NOW?" (15). Why can't she, indeed, is the very question the readers might ask. She eventually receives an explanation from her mother's friend that some people are transgender.

As Mayil knows of the hijra community through Bollywood movies, Jyothy draws her entire understanding of homosexual relationships from the movie *Dostana* (64). It explains her disgusted reaction (in *Mostly Madly Mayil*) to the anonymous note she found in her notebook which she fears might be from a girl because she's "not a lesbain, pa" (101) and her dismissal of Ki's correction of the term. It turns out to be a completely innocuous matter as the class teacher was leaving these notes for the entire class to remind them of their self-worth, but the girls immediately associate it with a romantic secret admirer. The authors use the character of Jyothy largely to explore the prejudices and desires of a teenage girl who feels compelled by a heteronormative society to define her entire identity and purpose along the lines of sexuality so she can secure a romantic partner as soon as possible. She does. At 13, she starts dating a 16-year-old boy, which she flaunts as an achievement to Mayil and Ki

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8   The hijra community constitute the third gender in India and are culturally unique to South Asia. Early mentions of the hijra can be found in texts from Ancient India, and they have been legally recognized as the Third Gender by the Supreme Court of India since 2014. However, they continue to face prejudice, discrimination, and violence. For further reading, please see: Renate Syed; Serena Nanda; Rukhsar Hussain; Madhavi Menon; and Anjali Arondekar.

(Rajendran and Subramaniam, *Mostly Madly Mayil* 23). Butalia notes, "given the taboo that surrounds sex, it is not surprising that most people are almost completely ignorant about these issues. This ignorance often continues well into adulthood where facts, fiction and fantasy coexist in a massive sexual blunderland" (xviii). Jyothy's homophobia is echoed in the slurs that Thamarai hears from his peers and even his own father, targeted at him because he prefers dance to martial arts and likes to play with dolls.

Speaking about their friendship group, Aaliya, one of the narrators in Himanjali Sankar's *Talking of Muskaan* (2014) says: "[t]hey'd been skirting around the issue like dainty Victorian ladies, not using the word homosexual but delicately hinting at it. What century are we living in?" (60). I now turn to this novel, which explores LGBTQ+ identities and pointedly calls out the "Victorian puritanism"[9] (Vanita and Kidwai, 196).

LGBTQ+ IDENTITIES AND HEGEMONIC REPRISALS

Talking of Muskaan revolves around the eponymous character's gradual revelation of her sexual orientation as a lesbian and the many ways in which her social circle reacts to this, from rejection and abusive behaviour to acceptance. Aaliya judges her friends for their puritanism, but she herself avoids the issue as much as she can. As Muskaan's best friend and beloved, it takes Muskaan's eventual suicide attempt for her to accept her own bisexuality and the harm she has caused Muskaan by ghosting, gaslighting, and rejecting her when Muskaan was at her lowest. The action culminates on 11 December 2013, the day the Supreme Court upheld Section 377, and Sankar hyper-specifies the setting by referring to Vikram Seth, the author and LGBTQ activist, transforming the moment from a reported to a lived experience (Seth, "On Section 377" and "My love is right" n.p.).[10] This moment is bookended by the patriarchal, spoilt, homophobic Prateek's decision to proudly and publicly 'out' Muskaan among the class and Aaliya privately calling Muskaan a "criminal" later that night (138). The narrative is structured as a flashback, beginning with the immediate aftermath of Muskaan's suicide attempt, and developing though reflections by its narrators as they trace the events which led to this point.

The novel features three narrative voices at gradually distant points of closeness with Muskaan: Aaliya, the confused best friend and beloved; Prateek, the entitled homophobe whom Muskaan rejects; and Subhojoy, the rival turned best friend. Each character offers a perspective on Muskaan as she spirals into depression because her entire support system has fallen away. Each represents a different aspect of the social system in which Muskaan

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9   I use the term as Vanita and Kidwai use it in *Same-Sex Love in India*, which in postcolonial India has developed to imply and refer to Victorian morality beyond its seventeenth-century religious origins.

10   Seth had appeared on *India Today* on 11 December 2013 after the verdict was announced.

struggles to breathe.[11] In the very first chapter, there is a scene in which Muskaan's best friends insist on giving her a makeover as something girls do (Sankar, *Talking of Muskaan* 17), steamrolling her protests, which Sankar uses to establish Muskaan's position and fears as an outsider to the heteronormative system. The makeover scene is a grotesque parody of conversion therapy – to turn "Macho Girl to Poster Girl. The new face of Muskaan" as Divya says (14) – used against gender non-conforming youth. Muskaan rightly compares it to "a cult thingy" (17) and Aaliya ironically describes it as such (14). This scene both establishes Muskaan's own isolation as she feels her friends reject her authentic self and reveals how their 'well-intentioned' actions only serve to gaslight her as they keep patronizingly dismissing, belittling, and infantilizing her choices. In a statement which foreshadows Aaliya's own contradictions, she says: "I don't get why we have to force her as if she's an imbecilic infant. Even if she is" (18).

The girls are acutely discomfited by Muskaan's refusal to conform to gender roles and their efforts are more for their own peace of mind than for Muskaan's happiness. They cannot accept her as she is. The other girls in the group, barring Aaliya, are all in heterosexual (and therefore socially acceptable) relationships. They conspire with Muskaan's mother to get Muskaan to conform by wearing dresses instead of jeans and T-shirts, pressuring her to partake in stereotypically feminine activities like waxing and dating boys (17, 40, 61). Aaliya repeatedly victim-blames Muskaan to shift responsibility, thinking "[h]ere she was ranting against us for getting after but when it came to herself, she didn't seem to have any doubts. She obviously thought it was okay for her to be this way while the rest of us were just plain mean or something" (41). Aaliya is quite aware that they repeatedly hurt Muskaan (34), but she refuses to accept that Muskaan's issue is with being forced to conform to a patriarchal standards of gender performativity (35), as seen in the scene where Muskaan privately confesses to her (39). For Aaliya, non-conformity is far too stressful and troublesome: "[b]ut, Muskaan, it just makes life easier when you do what's expected of you" (36). The lesbian kiss that follows between them – one of the first such depictions in Indian YA– is consensual, but Aaliya then starts to doubt herself – "All that kissing? All that homosexuality?" (38) – and acts distantly towards Muskaan, emphatically othering her. Aaliya's reaction is what can be read as "excessive heterosexuality" and "compartmentalization" (Kaul 168), where one engages in tropes and acts which socially accepted as heterosexual as a defense against homosexuality, as Aaliya does. Hence, Aaliya goes to a house party after the incident to prove that she is straight. She kisses a boy to clarify internally her sexuality – "I plan to condition my mind to be attracted to boys only" (Shankar, *Talking of Muskaan* 100) – and repeatedly assures herself that she is not gay (66). In her narration, she frequently devolves from talking about Muskaan to thinking about her dance routines because thinking about Muskaan brings her face-to-face with her learnt

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11 See Ritwika Roy for further exploration of the mental health aspects.

homophobia and complicity in the social ostracization of her friend. Muskaan's confession puts the power with Aaliya, who then uses it to hurt.

Foucault describes confession as "a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship" (60, 61), as the interpretation of the confession is contingent on the biases held by the listener. Classmates and friends who speculate about Muskaan use Muskaan's non-conformity as a non-verbal confession when bullying her. Scared of her own feelings, Aaliya wields a repressive power over Muskaan too, and as Muskaan shrinks further into silence within the narrative, the rumours of homosexuality spread. Classmates and teachers bully her alike. A teacher, Mrs. Joshi, even calls Muskaan to the staff room and tells her to play football with the boys with a wink (Shankar, *Talking of Muskaan* 84), reinforcing the discomforting "Macho Muskaan" (17) moniker her former friends had given her and causing further hurt. This culminates in Prateek blaming her for pranking him and violating her consent by exposing what she has held secret:

> 'Hey, homo, how are you doing?' Prateek answered, loudly and theatrically, and there was complete silence in the room. Muskaan took a step backwards, almost staggering as if Prateek had hit her in the face. [...]. He looked at her threateningly. 'But then you are abnormal. Homosexuals are abnormal. Everyone knows that.' (114)

That evening, when the Supreme Court maintains homosexuality as criminal, Prateek is shown to be vindicated by the law. He says, "Muskaan would be knowing that not only me but the laws of the country didn't support people like her [... The other classmates] would all be secretly admiring me for what I said. It had legal backing after all" (121). And Aaliya, further confused about her bisexuality and Muskaan, after watching the news with her "armchair activist" mother (Chanda 180), calls Muskaan a criminal. She reflects: "I wanted to be powerful. To hurt Muskaan. To make her repent" (Shankar, *Talking of Muskaan* 138) but the silence this mutates to is loud in its oppression: "Silence [...] There was complete silence from Muskaan" (138). Muskaan's silence physically manifests in her subsequent attempted suicide. Juxtaposed with the Supreme Court's decision, this is a microcosmic example of the predicament of LGBTQ+ people who live in a society in which homophobia is legally protected. Seeing the news on TV, Subhojoy thinks, "on the day when many gays were going back into hiding, she was being pushed out into the open" (125).

Prateek's open homophobia is inculcated by his family. For example, his father asks, "[y]ou don't think it is the homo troubling you, do you?" (110), emphasizing the bigoted language parents pass down to their children. Aaliya's homophobia, however, stems from an internalized indoctrination in which she fears being an enemy of the state. Hence, while waiting at hospital, when she imagines how the entire suicide attempt must have played out; this becomes a reverse-confession of guilt for the reader alone to encounter. Repenting that she wronged Muskaan, she expresses a wish to follow personal desire over social desire, in a

way taking back from the reader their power to judge her sins. One might say that Sankar uses this textual moment subversively to undermine the social power to sanction and silence sexuality. The text becomes more effective than any perfunctory sex education class, as is made explicit when Aaliya mocks the documentaries they are occasionally made to watch: "Sex education, like last time? Or icebergs that need saving? Though the same documentary should work for both" (95). Aaliya's comments indicate the lack of seriousness with which both the school and its students treat matters such as sex education and global warming. *Talking of Muskaan* allows its reader to understand empathically peers who are oriented differently, through the use of the first-person narrators who are constructed as deliberately regular, ordinary teenagers in a Delhi school. It calls out adults who feel sex is taboo for children, and who enable homophobia to cause active harm those same children. In this regard, the novel does what largely single-sex schools or co-educational schools with strict divisions of male and female spaces cannot: consider the possibility of same-sex love.

Suppression and erasure of same-sex love festers in publishing too. *Talking of Muskaan* was written and published at the same time as Payal Dhar's *Slightly Burnt* (2014). Both authors have spoken about reviewing each other's manuscripts (Banerjee 164). Both novels involve an LGBTQ+ teenager coming out to their best friends, who have a tough time processing the news. The novels broke ground when they were published, but *Slightly Burnt* suffered from lack of publisher support. Barely eight years from publication, it is out of print and circulation as the publishers have pulped the remaining stock of print copies (@payaldhar n.p.).[12] When chain bookstores in India continue to stock Blyton's and J.K. Rowling's work in abundance, what is this but an act of exerting control over a perceived "deviant" book (@payaldhar n.p.),[13] silencing discussions of teenage sexuality and homosexuality to appease a primarily urban middle- and upper-class reading public who would find it controversial? Even Sankar notes that despite not being against Section 377, parents and teachers are wary of exposing children to the idea of same-sex love in literature (Banerjee 171). It remains the mainstream sociocultural perception that homosexuality, as well as female sexuality, are phenomena that must be hidden but also treated with aggressive caution for their disruptive potential.

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12 Dhar herself found out about this after I had contacted her to enquire after copies. My inability to secure a copy at the time of writing of this article is the reason for its exclusion from consideration despite its importance.

13 Dhar tells me, "To begin with, there was a lot of pressure to market the book as YA. This was partly because they thought it would sell better (which is true). There was also outright homophobia from the head of the marketing team at Bloomsbury. He said in a meeting in which I was present that he didn't think the book was suitable for children and he wouldn't like his 14-year-old son to read it. I was too shocked to react, but nobody else did either, which says a lot! Otherwise, schools and festivals have been hesitant to have events around the book, but the few interactions I have had with actual readers have been very positive. In other words, the gatekeepers have had problems, not the target readership!" [Used with permission].

The Indian Government ostensibly started a School Health Programme in 2018 for implementation in government schools, not calling it 'sex education' to avoid causing offense to gatekeepers. As Chakravarti argues, "[s]ex education *per se* cannot be a progressive project. In fact it can often become a means of reinforcing moralistic norms of behaviour, gender stereotypes and an unquestioning acceptance of institutions like class, family and marriage" (390), as seen in *Muskaan*: "'What's this 377 business?' [Aaliya] asked sulkily. 'It's an article in the Indian constitution which says that gays are criminals', Ahaan said proudly. Ma would've told him" (131). Rote, incomplete, biased learning leads to exactly this, allowing the perpetuation of discrimination against sexual minorities and sexuality itself. The lack of formalized, or inadequate, sexuality education in India caters to the gatekeepers and serves the purpose of maintaining prevalent taboos towards sexual violence, LGBTQ+ people, and sexuality in general. These taboos in turn work to maintain the existing power structures. The fewer questions are asked, the more the dominant groups are able to oppress the desires of the minority. After all, what is sexuality but an expression of desire, and what is taboo but a desire to control that desire?

Anurima Chanda records:

> In a chat with the team at Saffron Tree, the writers mentioned that this book [*Mayil Will Not Be Quiet!*] evolved out of a course that they did in college of which feminism was a part. On realizing that much of it was 'heavily theoretical' and might be obscure for many readers, especially a child, they wanted to find out a way to dole out the same in a much more simplified version. (118-119)

Though this quote specifically refers to the *Mayil* books, the other texts can be seen in this light too: as forming a network of resistance against a repressive system which believes all sex education should teach is abstinence and maintain ignorance, a system which allows teenagers and adults alike to become victims of abuse, coercion, and violence. Together, they subversively impart education about adolescent sexuality and desire through their relatable, urban, middle-class characters who are pitted against conservative, toxic thought systems. The violence that is faced by adolescent girls is portrayed in *The Lies We Tell* and the *Mayil* books, the latter of which, along with *Talking of Muskaan*, also exposes the deep-rooted homophobia and transphobia that exists in urban, educated Indians, forcing the reader to ask uncomfortable questions about themselves.

Talking about how she got her idea to write *Slightly Burnt*, Dhar suggests: "[t]he idea that children might have questions about sexuality, their own or of others, is a terrifying thought for us, adults, and the way we deal with it is to pretend it does not exist or shut them up when they bring up the issue" (qtd. in Chari n.p.). Advani writes in the introduction to

Dark Room that "we fall between thinking of the young as both too young to know about sex and too sexually forward to be trusted with sexual information" (xxxvi). This repressive infantilization is something that the novels I have discussed in this article resist through their portrayal of young adults as sexual citizens. They each question the taboos around sex and sexuality, imposed and maintained by groups in positions of power. while highlighting that young people subconsciously learn about sex and sexuality from their surroundings, instinctively maintaining silence around the adults who would have them not know.

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