PREFACE

"What words of passage to that unlit place? What rites of sense?"

So Meena Alexander asks in her poem, "Rites of Sense," in this issue of *Feminist Studies*, which takes as its point of departure current studies of women and gender in India and the South Asian diaspora. Its essays link First and Third World studies concerning gender, women's bodies, reproduction, and sexuality with the tightly entwined themes of citizenship, community, and individual agency in the discourses of nationalism, postcolonialism, subaltern studies, and, of course, feminism. Alexander's poem continues, "Amma, I am dreaming myself into your body/It is the end of everything". . . . The narrator's exhausted mother seems an image of pathetic alterity, thwarted opportunity, and sacrificial love who has nonetheless enabled her globe-traveling daughter to "stitch my woman's breath/into the mute amazement of sentences."

As object of guilty love and subject of imperial appropriations, Mother India is a contested metaphor throughout this issue. She is the quiet strength of Hindu tradition upholding ancient practices weakened by colonial domination and the outraged mother of the child bride Phulmonee, whose death, "weltering in blood" after marital rape in 1890, spurred the controversy over the Age of Consent laws in colonial India and helped galvanize the Indian feminist movements whose legacy extends to the present.

Passages and displacements are central to the essays and creative works gathered here. This issue begins, suitably enough, in an airport in New Delhi, where a South Asian anthropologist, now based in the United States, is halted on her quest to study the mountain peoples of Ladakh by the intractable bureaucracies and exoticized inequalities of modern transport and tourism. In "Points of Departure: Feminist Locations and the Politics of Travel in India," Ravina Aggarwal reverses traditional anthropological method that privileges "localized dwelling over movement" and seeks to freeze native peoples in pristine timelessness. Instead, she deconstructs "this dichotomy between field and home" by plunging her reader into the temporary timelessness of the canceled flight and into the restless "bazaar" of the departure lounge "where products are transported, knowledge is traded, and landscapes and peoples are commoditized and consumed."

In contrast to Aggarwal's article where a liminal location is transformed into an ethnographically significant space of en-

counter, Paola Bacchetta's "Reinterrogating Partition Violence: Voices of Women/Children/*Dalits* in India's Partition" graphically presents a politically and culturally inscribed power of place with its potentially violent demands on loyalty, belonging, and expulsion. Personal narratives of the survivors of the process in 1947 that forced migrations to achieve a more Hindu India and a more Muslim Pakistan document how female bodies were equated with notions of home, and how religious "communities" and national territories became sites for men to mark their claims, desecrations, and acts of retribution. Although women were positioned as either "ours" or "theirs," stories from both sides of the partition demonstrate that women could expect few protections. A woman whose brutalized and mutilated body carried the message of hatred and humiliation back to her family was often forced to die at the hands of her own kinsmen to preserve male honor. Restoring the memory of this violence to history as a palpable reality of women's lives, however, does not mean that victimization was the only story left untold. Also salient were the opportunities for education and for entry into the workforce that many women found in a moment, however confusing, when traditional structures were disrupted. Women's agency must be situated in these contradictory ways.

Meditating on the unevenness of power and domination, Ashwini Tambe develops the concept of colliding yet "Colluding Patriarchies" in her review essay, "The Colonial Reform of Sexual Relations" in nineteenth-century India. Feminists cannot accept a simple ascending trajectory of progress, she shows, nor the imperialist notion that British rule caused the triumph of progressive thinking on the status of women over the benighted oppressions of Indian orthodoxy. Instead, feminist social historians have probed the theoretical question of why colonial social legislation centered so obsessively on women's sexual practices. Ideologies of femininity and masculinity, contemporary feminist scholars show, were shaped in the relationships between colonial and nationalist forces; the ideology of a desexualized but maternalist middle-class femininity evolved as the necessary complement to a public sphere of citizenship contested between British men and Indian men. In fact, the colonial state helped constitute the private domain of marriage and sexuality that Indian nationalists later rallied to defend from colonial interference.

New possibilities for asserting women's rights arising from unexpected fissures in hegemonic authority is a common theme in essays by Tanika Sarkar and Mrinalini Sinha. In "A Prehistory of Rights: The Age of Consent Debate in Colonial Bengal" Sarkar asks how concepts of "rights" and "entitlement" developed for women when the notion of individuated identity was neither legally sanctioned nor culturally acknowledged. Sarkar argues that the rise of a counter-hegemonic public sphere was crucial to this process. Triggered by the death of eleven-year-old Phulmonee, the outcry and controversy over child marriage challenged the authority of both Hindu leaders and the British colonial state. The incident embarrassed cultural nationalists who had tied the survival of Hindu culture to the faithful support of Hindu women. Forced to argue that the life of a young girl was a small sacrifice compared with the potential death of a culture, Hindu nationalists were cast in an uncomfortable position. The colonial state, in setting the age of consent at ten, was also caught in a contradictory stance: their practical deference to traditional authority fell short of their self-justification as enlightened modernizers. Although officially without voice in public affairs, mothers and other female relatives testified to the pervasive suffering of child brides and so fostered, in the public discourse, the fledgling notion of a woman's claim to rights-bearing personhood expressed as her capacity to chose life over death.

Tracing this notion of self-activated personhood into the next century, Sinha's essay, "Refashioning Mother India: Feminism and Nationalism in Late Colonial India," argues that in the interwar years of the twentieth century, feminists played a pivotal role in constituting the "modern Indian woman" as the model for the citizen of the new nation-state. Breaking through the dichotomies of colonialist "modernity" and cultural nationalist "tradition," women's organizations with a liberal feminist agenda spearheaded an alternative conception of modernity for Indian nationalism. When middle-class women's organizations mobilized against Virginia Mayo's imperialist tract, *Mother India,* which sought to discredit Indian self-rule by indicting the society's treatment of women, organized women put the "woman question" at the center of public discourse and established social reform as the litmus test of modern nationalist fervor. In rallying support for the Sarda Bill to penalize child marriage and raise the age of consent, three all-India

women's organizations argued that women's issues cut across caste, class, and religious divides and so constituted a universal condition on which a truly nationalist discourse and a modern abstract notion of citizenship could be constituted in India.

U. Kalpagam's review essay, "The Women's Movement in India Today–New Agendas and Old Problems," richly situates the two essays by Sarkar and Sinha in the broader historical sweep of women's movements up to the present. One striking contrast in the rhetoric of women's politics before and after the nation's independence is the new politicizing of woman as daughter rather than mother as rallying device. Kalpagam emphasizes the diversity of politics in the multitude of women's groups in post-independence India. The struggle to assert the autonomy of women's issues and to draw attention to multiple forms of violence against women has gained ground in progressive leftist politics. At the same time, however, recent successes in right-wing movements have brought issues of identity in a multiethnic and multireligious country to the fore. The growing mobilization of women within these right-wing movements is evident in a recent instance of widow immolation (*sati*) in north India. When pro-*sati* and anti-*sati* processions of women confront each other, often shouting the same slogans of women's empowerment, prior assumptions about both Indian feminism fall, and leftist-oriented alliances are disrupted. Such incidents challenge contemporary feminists to consider whether these right-wing formations should be considered part of broader women's movements.

The resurgence of powerful communal and religious identities for women and the problem of building solidarity among women is echoed in Richa Nagar's "Religion, Race, and the Debate on *Mut'a* in Dar es Salaam." Nagar illustrates how South Asian Muslim women in Tanzania sometimes collude with the men in their communities in countenancing the institution of *Mut'a* or temporary marriage between their husbands and African women who are not of South Asian ancestry. This custom regularizes the divide between formal wives, whose virtue and passivity ensures the coherence of the racial and religious community, and the *Mut'a* wives, who are women of disadvantaged class status. The custom thus allows the men of the Shia Ithna Asheri Muslim community sexual liberties at the expense of both groups of women and illustrates "the gendered policing of communal fron-

tiers and the negotiated construction of racial, religious, and class differences" in the contemporary multicultural, but far-from-homogeneous, world of diaspora, displacement, and renegotiated social frontiers.

The importance of social class in the construction of gender is also a major theme of Raka Ray's ethnographic study, "Femininity, Masculinity, and Servitude: Domestic Workers in Calcutta in the Late Twentieth Century." Although male domestic servants provide the traditional images of faithful loyalty for the middle classes of Calcutta, a changing economy has made the servant class increasingly female. In multiple ways, Ray shows, old ideologies are in conflict with contemporary realities, and one result is a reconfiguration of gender on the part of the servants in ways not shared with their masters. In fact, because middle-class *bhadralok* identity is premised on protected femininity, and autonomous masculinity, attributes explicitly defined as the opposite of servitude, servants are by definition excluded from the hegemonic tropes of gender in their society. Their responses, Ray shows, redefine but do not subvert cultural ideals. When the subalterns do speak, at least through the mediation of the anthropologist, their stories are moving and complex. They are stories that imitate and aspire to middle-class ideals at the same time that they carve out alternative values of responsible femininity and masculinity that find themselves through a right to love and be loved.

Augmenting the advances in feminist scholarship in the gendered analysis of nationalism and empire, of postcolonialism and contemporary politics, the concluding essays in this volume follow Ashwini Tambe's call for a fuller analysis of sexuality and for a history of women's pleasures as well as their victimization. Both pleasure and victimization are graphically depicted in the quilts embroidered by poor Indian women that illustrate the art essay, "Recrafting Contemporary Female Voices: The Revival of Quilt Making among Rural Hindu Women of Eastern India." In these quilts the "subaltern" women, usually considered the most dominated and disadvantaged of India's population, "stitch" their "woman's breath," not "into the mute amazement of sentences" but into delicate and fanciful forms, some showing lush flowers and free-flying birds, while others depict such emotionally laden and politically tense subjects as the birth control clinic and dowry murders. The lovely images spell out the sufferings of women's

lives in a context that indicts corporate irresponsibility and environmental damage, not merely the brutalities of individual men. The quilts also celebrate joy and opportunity through women's education, marriage without dowry, and the female associations fostered by the quiltmaking collective itself.

The right to love can take many forms, and the popular twentieth-century writer Kamala Das, some of whose poems are reprinted here, has been known by both her literary admirers and detractors for her fearless quest of love, sexuality, and autonomy. Whereas feminist critics have read Das's autobiography, *My Story*, as the tale of an independent woman's struggle against patriarchal marriage and sexual objectification, Rosemary Marangoly George complicates that story in her "Calling Kamala Das Queer: Rereading *My Story*." George deploys queer reading practices to notice the willful evasions and layered nuances of Das's text, which exalt the narrator's "innocent" attractions to other women and her passionate perversity as her husband's cross-dressed boy toy. George insists that same-sex desire in Das's work "does not operate along a hetero-homo divide, nor does it confer an identity as lesbian . . . on the protagonist"; instead, it destabilizes such divisions and critiques heteronormativity as well as patriarchy. The gaps between local and global discussions of Das, George contends, illuminate the transnational negotiations between locations that are part of the difficulty and opportunity of contemporary feminist scholarship and creativity today. These negotiations and displacements, as the essays in this issue illustrate primarily in reference to South Asia, are strategies increasingly important to First World and metropolitan feminists as well.

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