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Resenting Other People's Being: Narrating Pakistani Social Rivalry and Discontent in Faiqa Mansab's *This House of Clay and Water*

Daniela Vitolo
University of Naples L'Orientale
dvitolo@unior.it

Novels written in English by Pakistani authors frequently present a society based on a class system that makes social mobility challenging and that dictates economic and moral standards, status symbols and acceptable behaviour. Fiction is a medium for the portrayal of the effects of this socio-cultural environment on the individual, and for highlighting the tensions within a highly structured society. Narrated from the perspective of two women and a hijra, Faiqa Mansab's novel *This House of Clay and Water*, shows how emotions such as resentment and anger arise and intensify in different environments that constitute Pakistani society while people face the challenges connected with the choice of obeying or resisting social rules.

Daniela Vitolo is Postdoctoral Researcher at the Department of Literary, Linguistic and Comparative Studies of the University of Naples "L'Orientale". Her interests include postcolonial South Asian literatures and diaspora narratives. She is author of various book chapters and journal articles among which are *History, Borders, and Identity: Dealing with Silenced Memories of 1971* (Routledge), *Relocating the Memory of the Partition in Bapsi Sidhwa's Defend Yourself against Me* (Palgrave) and *Mera Jism, Meri Marzi. Claiming the Body where Body is and Obscene Word* (Anglistica AION).

The way in which social dynamics affect individual lives is often explored in contemporary English-language Pakistani narratives. Both literary and popular fiction portray Pakistani society as a class-based system where social mobility is challenging and a collective life model is ingrained, dictating economic and moral standards, status symbols and acceptable behaviour. Fiction is a medium for the portrayal of the effects of this socio-cultural environment on the individual, and for highlighting the tensions within a highly structured society. The choice between conformity and resistance to collective norms has an impact on personal lives, often in dramatic ways. As public models shape private lives and steer them towards collective norms, these novels also highlight the blurred boundaries between the public and private spheres. This article shows how emotions such as resentment and anger arise and intensify in Pakistani society, using Faiqa Mansab's *This House of Clay and Water* (2017) as an example. In this novel, the characters show both local and global aspects of these dynamics, moving in different environments that reflect and suffer from social forces.

Set in Lahore, *This House of Clay and Water* explores the lives of two women, Sasha and Nida, and a hijra, Bhanggi, who have very distinct approaches to life, come from distant backgrounds and have different relationships with their bodies. All three characters have to deal with the difficulty of accepting a situation that they have been pushed into by others. Nida and Sasha were married off by their parents both finding themselves trapped in disappointing marriages. Sasha is the unhappy mother of two daughters who dreams of the wealthy life her lower middle-class husband cannot give her. She tries to get what she wants by engaging in extramarital affairs. Nida is married to an affluent politician and has lost her only child, who died one year after she was born with Down syndrome and a fatal heart condition. Bhanggi, who is neither male nor female but as a teenager has realised he identifies as male, was abandoned at birth and taken into the house of an older hijra who, while being a parental figure to him, was also the first to introduce him to a life of exploitation and violence. Sasha, Nida and Bhanggi share a sense of alienation from the world around them, in which they are non-conforming individuals who face forms of discrimination and punishment as a result of their situations and the choices that they make.

Sad passions and Pakistan's "general moral law"

The circumstances the characters are involved in suggest that the world that Mansab represents can be seen as a prototypical case. Indeed, while the forces at play in the novel are recognizable as traits shared between capitalist, patriarchal and nationalist societies, the specifics of the Pakistani context, where the rigidity of the social structures considerably reduces individual freedoms and possibilities, amplify the outcomes of the established dynamics. Thus, the novel can be read through the theoretical framework provided by Pankaj Mishra's analysis of the current moment as the age of anger (Mishra 2017), and by Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of Baruch Spinoza's category of sad passions (Deleuze 1992). Deleuze's understanding of individual essence, or conatus, as determined at a collective level by the affections generated when a body encounters another body, provides a key to analyse how the novel represents the dynamics at play in contemporary society. According to this conception, indeed, all affections entrenched in the two fundamental affects of sadness and joy shape our reactions to the environment we are in. Since we are always driven by our "quest for what is useful or good for us" (Deleuze 1992, 243), when we experience sadness we try to create the conditions for the

body that causes it to "be reconciled with our own. We are thus determined to do everything to ward off and destroy the object that is its cause" (Deleuze 1992, 243). Both within local communities and at a global level, the present appears increasingly characterised by the emergence of sad passions such as resentment, anger, hatred and by a consequent rise in social tensions. Pankaj Mishra (2017) explains this phenomenon as the coming to light of the dark side of the dominant Anglo-American capitalist order. Two cornerstones of capitalism, individualism and the will to obtain the objects of collective desire, lie at the foundation of increasing social tensions, not simply because relationships are affected by the hostilities among individuals contending in a generalised competition of all-against-all, but also, more importantly, because of the resentment nurtured among those who lose out in this fight. The adoption of the Western model at a global level, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, can be attributed in part to non-Western elites sharing both the Western world's faith in the possibility of progress and the wealth generated by the system, and its failure to foresee the adverse consequences of this. Moreover, the blindness with which many areas of the non-Western world have joined the race to catch up with the Anglo-American model stems from the belief that anyone can achieve its target notwithstanding the fact that the Western capitalist system was nurtured by exploiting those same third world countries joining a competition in which they are greatly disadvantaged. Once independent, ex-colonies like Pakistan tried to shorten the gap between themselves and the West by applying the Anglo-American model to their local contexts without proper adjustments. The adoption of the capitalist system was facilitated by the fact that the local society was structured around a cast/class system that made it almost natural for the members of the elite to invest in the market getting high profits from the unfair treatment of the labourers. The costs of a rapid and undisciplined development were paid by the larger strata of a population already oppressed and made vulnerable by an ancient social model. Instead of reducing the gap between the elite and the subalterns, quick economic growth amplified the existing structural problems, while modernisation brought radical changes that affected and caused the loss of traditional ways of life, which resulted in further uncertainty and instability.

When Pakistan was created in 1947, it was a country lacking both a clear identity and the economic, material and human resources needed to build a new state. The elites then in power had been the privileged and Western-style educated natives under colonial rule, and they preserved the centuries-old class system that had been maintained by the British. This continued to funnel social and political power and wealth into the hands of a limited social group, to the detriment of the majority of the population. At the birth of Pakistan, the political elites promised its people a bright future of safety, equality, justice and wealth. However, the state's foundations were so weak that it has been impossible, during more than seventy years of existence, for the country to establish a strong democracy. Political instability, which has led to periods of total suspension of democracy, an uneven distribution of wealth and power, and rampant corruption at all social levels, has meant that the original hopes have been shattered. The populace are left struggling in a system that offers them only barely attainable goals and desires, brought about by the country's signing up to the logics of the global market economy (Hashmi 2018, UNDP 2021). The difficulties involved in social mobility in a weak job market are coupled with the fact that social relations tend to respond to a caste-like system from which individuals derive strict logics of identity and segregation, which they apply to their everyday relations. Thus, while everyone is

exposed to the same models and desires, many are forced to realise that they will never be able to satisfy their yearnings[1].

Therefore, while being forced to join in with this logic, most people also have to deal with the frustrations caused by insecurity, nepotism, classism, and a constant economic crisis, as they move in an environment that shatters their dreams of individual and collective growth and stability (Khan et. al. 2018). When resentment, from being isolated and personal, becomes a collective feeling, it emerges and shapes particularly if directed towards a scapegoat, a kind of person or group that can be easily singled out as the enemy and as the cause of individual and collective failure and frustration. Consequently, the "intensely human desire for convergence and resemblance" (Mishra 2017, 51) finds means of satisfaction when people can unite against something or someone perceived as a source of danger, usually identified as deviating from the norm. In such a circumstance, individuals experience what Deleuze calls "indirect joys" (Deleuze 1992, 245) which derive from the destruction of something that is a source of sadness. However, because such joys are "imprisoned in sadness" (Deleuze 1992, 245) they are illusionary and keep individuals enslaved by their passions. They even increase the distance from the ideal condition people should aspire to, that of the free person whose "power of action" is incremented through the harmonic relationships established with those around them.

Widespread discontent facilitates the establishment of a "general moral law" (Mishra 2017, 92) developed to vehicle to the majority an ideology that dictates and justifies the rules and logics which the community must follow, while also providing a representation of the current factors that seem to be endangering the values of the community. In such a context, conforming to the vision supported by the majority seems necessary in order to be accepted as part of the community, while becoming a defender of the general moral law authorises a person to feel more righteous than their peers. Thus, again, people can engage in individualistic competition driven by their desire to appear successful by fitting in with the collective model, this time with fewer chances of facing manifest failure if they adhere, at least on the surface, to the given rules. In such a context, the spreading of self-appointed moral police officers reduces the space of freedom as everyone is aware of being constantly under surveillance. As Mishra maintains, "Such a society where social bonds are defined by a dependence on other people's opinion and competitive private ambition is a place devoid of any possibility of individual freedom" (Mishra 2017, 92).

Since the early stages of Pakistan's existence, nationalism has purveyed a coherent understanding of the identity and purpose of the community at large and has thus supplied individuals with behavioural norms and a distinct form of cultural self-identification. Pakistan has been seen as a country where the process of production of nationhood as described by Benedict Anderson has failed (Anderson 1991; Jalal 1995; Jafferlot 2002; Cohen 2004). However, Anderson's conception of the nation as a community imagined as intrinsically limited provides a key to read how nationalism's

[1] An example of how desires are induced, and how being able to satisfy them confers a sort of social aura while at the same time generates resentment among those who cannot do the same, can be found in the use of the term "burgers" as a synonym for "rich kids" in Pakistan. When fast food companies entered the Pakistani market, they were an attractive but expensive novelty, the cost of fast food being high compared to that of street and, very often, even average restaurant food. Thus, "burger" began to be used by those unable, or rarely able, to eat at fast food restaurants as a sarcastic definition for young people who could afford to eat at chains such as McDonald's and KFC.

deeply exclusionary nature nurtures and supplies ways to express negative solidarities. For those experiencing resentment, adhering to the nationalist narrative appears to be reassuring and provides a justification for the vocal, and even physical, expression of their frustration, anger and hatred as it indicates scapegoats towards whom negative solidarity can be directed. The enemies singled out by Pakistani nationalism are women who do not conform to the prescribed rules; ethnic, religious and gender minorities; and anyone who is perceived as a potential threat to the nation and its Islamic values. In this way, the men and women who feel frustrated and angry are endorsed and encouraged to turn their anger against those who are presented as the enemies who try to corrupt Pakistan's social, moral and religious system.

Sasha's mimetic desire and the frustrations of the middle class

In *This House of Clay and Water*, the protagonists' departures from social norms lie behind their accidental meetings and explain why they develop their relationships, with Sasha and Nida becoming friends and Nida and Bhanggi falling in love. They all meet at the same place, Daata Darbar, a Sufi shrine they are driven to by different reasons but similar needs. Symbolically, as a space open to those who are on the margins of society, such as beggars and drug addicts, the shrine represents an ideal location for the encounters between these characters, who see it as a safe place. Moreover, as a site associated with Sufi practices and philosophy, it invites a reflection upon the relationship between materiality and spirituality, an issue that is also rendered explicit in the desire of both Nida and Bhanggi to detach themselves from their bodies and the mundane dimension of life. This theme can also be traced in Sasha's embarking on a path towards redemption, which takes the form of adopting a more religious life.

Sasha uses the shrine as a safe drop off point when she wants to meet one of her lovers and it is here, the first time they meet, that she is immediately recognized by Nida as one of those women who give great importance to their physical appearance and outfits and who are used to having affairs with men: "The preferred diaphanous designer lawn-wear, imported shoes and bags all worth a fortune. Sometimes they engaged in bed-hopping, which commanded a subversive respect in this subculture" (Mansab 2017, 20). Nida's analysis of her is correct, indeed, prior to this encounter, Sasha has already been introduced in the novel in a scene where she enters as an escort a room in an elegant hotel and meets her client who, she seems to discover just at that moment, is Faheem, an old friend of her husband, Luqman. The two begin to meet up frequently, both finding excitement in the situation. By associating with Luqman's better-off friend, Sasha can take a sort of revenge against her husband who she sees as the main cause of her unhappiness. She even begins to nurture the idea that Faheem may leave his wife in order to be with her, thus granting her his permanent and undivided attention. Sasha's inability to grasp the difference between men's attention and their love is paralleled by her belief that happiness comes from the satisfaction of worldly desires, for which she finds a model in the lives of women from wealthy families. In fact, during her interactions with Nida she seems to be aware of the class gap between them, which means that Nida has the things she desperately wants. In this respect, Sasha exemplifies René Girard's (1989) definition of mimetic desire. According to the theorist, desire is produced at a social level: since biology does not provide people with an instinctive way of knowing how to behave in relation to desires, they look to others for guidance, ending up wanting what others have because if someone appears to be happy with what they

have, then having the same thing will bring the same kind of happiness. Thus, what appears to be a desire for a particular thing, be it an object or a condition, is actually a desire to be in somebody else's position. Since by looking at others everyone develops the same desires, appropriative mimicry results in mimetic rivalry, with people competing for the same goods while at the same time seeking to resemble the same models.

Engaged in her mimetic competition, Sasha is unconcerned about the risk of staining her own and her family's image, or even of losing what she has, and she enters a relationship that articulates competition in a number of ways. Faheem is attracted to Sasha because she introduces him to a life of material pleasures he had always thought to be unsuitable for him and he comes to a new realisation of how his capacity to spend money is a sign of his social power. Although he knows that he will not be able to maintain this lifestyle, and his relation with Sasha, for long, he is intoxicated by the experience: "He'd seen other people do it but he'd always thought the privileged life wasn't for him. He couldn't possibly afford to wear Hugo Boss and Armani. But now he did, and he felt like a new man" (Mansab 2017, 16). This situation also provides Faheem with a temporary distraction from a wife that he does not love and finds unattractive and excessive in her open demonstrations of her submission to him. However, the affair is not primarily about escaping his ordinary life or being able to attract a woman like Sasha. Rather, it is a way for Faheem to prove his superiority in a competition with his friend, since he is able to give Sasha what her husband cannot, making him more desirable to her than Luqman is: "under no circumstances was he going to give her the impression that he was impotent like her husband" (Mansab 2017, 11). Moreover, from Faheem's perspective, the extramarital affair does not put Sasha and himself on the same level. Indeed, he sees another proof of his superiority to Luqman when he compares Sasha to his own wife, as the latter embodies the ideal woman who is entirely devoted to her husband and children and who preserves, through her conduct, her and her husband's good name and dignity. A formally exemplary marriage is thus a source of pride that compensates for the private unhappiness it generates.

Sasha seems unaware of Faheem's thoughts about their relationship, probably because she is entirely focused on escaping her own frustrations, which derive from being trapped in a life she feels she has been forced into in order to conform to social conventions: "How cruel to quarter a woman in so many ways. The cruellest was this: being a mother" (Mansab 2017, 69). Apparently believing that a woman's wellbeing depends on the man she is associated with, she faces the disillusionment of realising that her husband is not the ambitious person she once thought him to be but rather an "ineffectual" (Mansab 2017, 69) man. Consumed by her resentment towards her husband she is uninterested in or unaware of his frustrations. Luqman is a clergyman crushed by the behaviour of a boss who seems to derive pleasure from exercising his hierarchical power: "Mirza gave me and Sadiq a few files to reorder, then every two minutes he'd come and ask, 'Luqman, will we get these reports any time this season?' The bastard. I hate him and his designer suits and his pumped-up body" (Mansab 2017, 72). Luqman's resentment towards his boss is explained not just by the man's tyrannical behaviour towards his employees. It springs especially from the privileged situation, the right background and connections, that enables his boss to look good in his designer suits and with his pumped-up body: "Arrogant son-of-a-bitch with his posh education from Aitchison and LUMS. Men like him think anyone who isn't an Aitchisonian is a loser. Anyone who doesn't have an MBA from bloody LUMS is a fool" (Mansab 2017, 69).

Aitchison and LUMS being respectively the most prestigious college for boys and university in Lahore, Luqman's attitude is reflected in a comment made by Nida when Sasha asks her about her family and upbringing: "Other status symbols like cars and houses, one could scoff at and move on; schools however symbolised more than one's background. Money came and went, class didn't" (Mansab 2017, 23). The strongest form of privilege is hard to overcome because it is rooted in the possibility of having access from a young age to those narrow circles, the admission to which will determine one's future chances. Personal associations with ivy league institutions are worn as blazons by the elite as a reminder of society's class structure. Through Faheem and Luqman the novel points out how economic and social pressures weigh upon men. With Pakistan being a strongly patriarchal society, the burden of economic growth is borne by men who are supposed to respond to their families' expectations, and who know that their value is measured in terms of their salary, bank account and, possibly, social connections. This is exemplified by the criteria applied to the choice of a husband in arranged marriages, where men are typically asked to declare how much they earn and what they own, and are frequently classified based on their professional qualifications or university degrees. If women must be obedient wives and mothers, men are always responsible for their family's economic and social growth. Sasha's resentment against her husband and her choice to disobey the rules can be understood as deriving from a feeling of having been cheated when signing the most important deal of her life.

Social imbalances combined with the desire to appear respectable, to fulfil social expectations and improve the family's status fuel a constant state of competition among peers seeking to emerge from their particular context. If it is true that such logic applies to all social groups with variations, it is the middle class that embodies these mechanisms in the clearest of ways as they are both proud of the condition they have attained and yet feel compelled to have more. Sasha and Luqman, the representatives of this class in the novel, although far apart, share the same sense of failure, which, as Mishra writes, leads to develop a form of resentment:

> An existential resentment of other people's being, caused by an intense mix of envy and sense of humiliation and powerlessness, *ressentiment*, as it lingers and deepens, poisons civil society and undermines political liberty. (Mishra 2017, 14)

Violence and a paralysing passivity are both expressions of the poisoning of individual and collective life. Despite his wife's unconcealed disappointment in him, we see Luqman's effort to provide for her when he hands her part of his meagre salary bonus, which she disdains (Mansab 2017, 70). At the same time, he seems to believe Sasha's lies about her branded accessories and her habit of spending evenings out, refusing to acknowledge the truth concerning his wife. Combined with his choice of staying at home in the evenings to take care of his old mother and children, this produces a kind of inversion of roles, with a stay-at-home father and a mother who has a murky social life, conveying the image of a man who has been made weak by his frustration and resentment. Instead of inquiring into his wife's whereabouts and engaging actively in his professional life to try to improve his condition, he accepts his state of affairs passively. This is in line with a conception of sad passions as being characterised by the power to affect negatively body and mind, reducing the ability to act. Spinoza, and later Gilles Deleuze (1987, 1992), highlight the political and economic function of the spreading of sad passions and of the debilitating negativity that goes with them, maintaining that these are instruments used by those – like the tyrant, the priest and

the oppressor – who want to keep power in their own hands and use sadness to make the majority of people powerless. Thus, capitalism appears to be characterised by the development of a system that nurtures sad passions in multiple ways with the purpose of keeping the majority impotent.

This sense of powerlessness can lead to outbursts of collective or individual violence which, as a form of negative engagement, in turn express and nurture further sad passions. The rape of Zoya, Sasha's daughter, by a servant can be read from this perspective. Distancing herself from the image of the ideal woman, Sasha is a self-confident person who, notwithstanding her use of her body and sexuality as a means to gain material benefits, is still able to retain control over these. This allows us to find a correspondence between Sasha and a minor character, Razia, a young servant who agrees to have sexual encounters with an older servant in return for goods of little value. Although they move in different social circles, both these characters are willing to use their bodies as a means to obtain non-essential products. When Razia is unable to satisfy the man's requests and brings Zoya to the servants' quarters to be her unwitting substitute, the servant rapes Zoya claiming that Sasha's behaviour makes his own act acceptable arguing "she is going to grow up to be a slut like her mother, why not now? Why not with me?" (Mansab 2017, 182). The justification he offers for his act follows the logic that when a woman misbehaves she dishonours herself and her family, in a way that particularly affects her female relatives. The rape of the young girl is the punishment Sasha gets for going against social rules. However, because with this act the man crosses a class boundary, it might also be understood as him taking a chance to express his resentment and alleviate his sense of impotence towards a family that is socially superior to him yet appears to him morally inferior. When Nida understands what has been done to Zoya, she helps the mother and daughter deal secretly with the necessity of an abortion. In this circumstance, with Nida's support, Sasha realises that her choices have impacted her daughters, whom she has mostly left alone, and starts a personal journey that leads her to abandon her current lifestyle, recognise the value of family love, appreciate her husband's integrity, and become a pious woman.

Nida not fitting in, women policing women, and the abject

The novel opens with Nida thinking about her life and her relationship with Saqib, her husband. As she reflects on how, as a girl, she was certain she would find true love and then contrasts her dreams with the reality of her marriage, she begins to reveal herself as someone who has never shared the characteristics of the women around her, "because I was *different*" (Mansab 2017, 2). Throughout the novel her difference is defined on two levels, as she thinks and feels in ways that distance her from the people around her, and her body proves unable to respond to social requirements. Nida's appearance is non-conforming because as an upper-class woman she should actively join in the assumed competition between the women in her circle by curating her look, trying to stay fit and wearing expensive and fashionable outfits, while also engaging in social interaction as the wife of a politician, supporting her husband by becoming the friend of other affluent men's wives and hosting events. At the crossroads of socio-economic and cultural factors, women suffer more than men from the limitations of personal freedom. For a woman like Nida, the rules dictated by her upper-class circle require her to follow the behavioural code set in place by a patriarchal structure sustained by the overlap of centuries-old traditions and culturally influenced interpretations of the teachings of

Islam. The rules of behaviour valid in any situation in Pakistan are ascribable to the idea that women have the responsibility to preserve and convey to the next generation the values and culture of their society, which they must, therefore, embody. This means that they are supposed to devote themselves to taking care of their family and educating their children, and to comply with the rules of modesty. Women who do not conform to this model, and especially those who claim their right to own their own body, and whose clothes or behaviours and relationships with men do not obey the requirements of covering and segregation, are easily accused of representing a threat to the family system, which is a major pillar of the social order.

If Sasha's rejection of norms and rules has a mundane purpose and exposes her to potential accusations of moral corruption, Nida's has different origins and outcomes, though it still exposes her to condemnation. Perceiving the vanity of the sophisticated world around her, she rejects the life it offers and shows no interest in taking care of her appearance, being unable to value the costly things she can afford, and feeling uncomfortable in her round body. Thus for Nida exercising power over her own body involves choosing to withdraw it from certain societal expectations. In fact, she feels most at ease when she wears a burqa in order to be free to move around the old city and spend time at the shrine, keeping her body and identity hidden, as if she can liberate herself from these for some time. Anonymity gives her some respite from the impossibility of ignoring a body that has failed her in its most important task, that of making her the mother of a healthy child. It also distances her from the judgments she is exposed to as a consequence of her character and her personal tragedy, which come primarily from her family. Leaving the house, veiling herself, and spending time in a holy place are for Nida a strategy for finding relief from the angst and the oppression that derive from the impossibility of being understood and accepted, which, after the death of her daughter, has thrown her into what appears to be a depressive condition. Having lost her daughter and being unable to communicate with her husband, Nida feels emptied of her life purpose, and is forced to deal with a pain deriving from the impossibility of giving and receiving love. She is aware of how the deterioration of her marriage stems from her giving birth to an unhealthy child and her later inability to fulfil her expected duties as wife. She and her husband begin to spend most of their time separated from each other, and their interaction is usually characterised by Saqib criticising her and Nida passively resisting him. She also thinks about the past, when she used to feel at peace with her role when, although not moved by her feelings for him, she would take care of her husband by mechanically providing him comfort and support.

Bearing criticism is a constant throughout her life, as she is scrutinised and judged, particularly by other women, especially her mother and mother-in-law. The former, dispenses teachings and criticism in an attempt to raise a daughter who follows social mandates; she is also the first person in the novel to represent the figure of the female castigator of misbehaving or non-conforming women when she is said to explain to her young daughter that "Only the most foolish girls believed boys when they proclaimed their love, especially without offering marriage first. Such girls were to be reviled and shunned" (Mansab 2017, 1). The mother's invocation of punishment in this case is explained by the fact that falling in love, and as a consequence love marriage, are seen as certain evidence of a woman's lack of integrity. The absence of solidarity among women also appears elsewhere in the novel, and it comes from women who are trying to prove their personal success as mothers and wives and who participate in a competition to demonstrate their own superiority by criticising and downgrading other

women. This ongoing social rivalry typically manifests as women engaging in moral policing of other women accusing them of being deviant and, therefore, dangerous. A reason why old and successful women like Nida's mother and mother-in-law are still engaged in this kind of competition is due to the notable lack of separation between individual and familial public image. The two women feel responsible for their adult offspring and their partners' behaviour because any mistakes and failures they may make can tarnish the family name, and the ability of their children to abide by the mandates of the community proves their success as mothers. Therefore, not receiving what is expected from the family's younger generation is not just a cause for disappointment, it is also regarded as an injustice, an undeserved failure, that will cost them humiliation in front of their peers. Thus, the mother-in-law's reaction to Nida's giving birth to an unhealthy child is a cruel one because this event damages the public image of her son and reduces the chances of him having an heir.

> "Do not even think of having another child. We cannot repeat this disaster. God has punished you. Why should my son suffer with you? [...] Saqib must find a new wife. [...] Saqib, stay away from your wife. It might be something contagious that she has. Don't let word of this to get out. Your political career is over if word of this leaks [...] imagine having a girl who isn't even normal. [...] You should have got rid of it." (Mansab 2017, 115)

Her violent condemnation and humiliation of Nida for something which she cannot be regarded as guilty of places Nida among the defective members of society who must be isolated to reduce the damage they may cause. This perspective on Nida and her daughter can be read through Julia Kristeva's definition of the abject as "what disturbs identity, system and order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 1982, 4). What the mother-in-law experiences when confronted with a diseased granddaughter and the woman who has birthed her is abjection, which is a strong reaction to something perceived as disturbing because it disrupts the common logics that are assumed to be natural and universal. While Nida is dealing with this situation in private one night at a party, she witnesses an example of women's lack of female solidarity as they judge harshly a young dancing girl who is entertaining some men while their wives are made to watch. The women, who are being humiliated by their husbands, pretend to be unaffected by the situation and, because they cannot react against their men, they resort to patronising and laughing at the girl:

> "A woman said with pity 'oh, poor thing. To be born into such a profession'. Another answered, 'I wish I could help her. Send her to school or something'. 'A little too late for that, don't you think? Said someone else. They laughed." (Mansab 2017, 120)

The women are thus avenging an offence that reveals their subordination to men by uniting to assert their moral and social superiority over the girl, because they are respectable wives.

Resentment can also be detected in the relationship between Nida and Sasha, which develops along the lines of female solidarity, but is also characterised by a tension that involves issues connected to their different backgrounds and the values and views that guide them. For Sasha, Nida's social superiority is paired with her explicit moral superiority, which is expressed through her disapproval of Sasha's decadent choices, and emphasised by her desire to detach herself from the material dimension of life as a way

to escape her own suffering. From Sasha's perspective, Nida's choice not to repress her feelings for Bhanggi reverses their positions and she takes the chance to retaliate against her as a way to express her hatred. It is Sasha, now on her new path to redemption, who tries to convince Nida to leave Bhanggi and go back to her husband, and to her duties as wife. Particularly, she voices the common perception of Nida's act as an aberration, first laughing at her –"Do you become more spiritual with a hijra? [...] Just out of curiosity, how does it even work?" (Mansab 2017, 248) –, and then calling it a proof that she has lost her mind: "You need a doctor, a psychologist. You are mentally unstable. I mean, for the love of God! A hijra?" (Mansab 2017, 250). Sasha classifies Bhanggi as abject because he belongs to "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1982, 4) and by doing this she places him and Nida outside of the accepted order, among those who are rejected because their non-conformity is perceived as a potential threat to society. However, Sasha's words do not seem to affect Nida for whom falling in love has the power to liberate her from social pressure: "Sleeping with the hijra. In love with the hijra. Loving the hijra. The anomaly, the monster. Subhuman. Diseased. Like my child. Mine alone to love. Judgement. Sentence. Exile" (Mansab 2017, 248). After being overcome by grief and anguish and by the resulting desire to escape from her life and body, Nida is finally able to accept that her choices exile her from society, and to find her place on its margins because, love being a joyful passion, she is empowered by the awareness that to be loved means "to be seen, held within a circle of arms, included and accepted" (Mansab 2017, 98). As Francesca Orsini suggests in the introduction to the volume *Love in South Asia*, love needs to be understood "as both 'affect' and 'sociality'" (Orsini 2006, 1) and, as such, observing the dynamics it generates, or that are connected to it, allows to conduct cultural investigations. In the novel, the love and desire that induce the two characters to act against society's diktats work as powerful means to resist the forms of oppression forced on them. The value retained by their choice needs to be read in the context of the studies conducted on the relationship between gender and desire. As Das Gupta (2017) and Gairola (2002), among others, have discussed, because the repression of women's desire has been a constant in South Asian patriarchal culture, women's ability to indulge in forbidden passions transforms them into desiring subjects, thus giving them agency over themselves and, potentially, the ability to affect society. Nida could have let resentment guide her behaviours but in falling in love with Bhanggi she finds a way to react to the oppression she is victim of and to the pain she feels.

Bhanggi as the sacrificial victim

Although Bhanggi pays with his life for letting his attraction towards Nida follow its natural course, also for him love operates as a liberating force as he discovers that intimacy and connection, with someone apparently distant but inwardly similar to him, frees him from social stigma and the burden of his unruly body. Indeed, Bhanggi's identity is determined by his abused body, which eludes neat definitions and is a source simultaneously of repulsion and forbidden attraction. As a hijra he belongs to a community that has been legally persecuted during the colonial period as well as by the laws of Pakistan on charges of obscenity and immorality (Pamment 2010), even though in recent times an effort has been made to recognise them as belonging to a third gender. However, on them weighs the stigma of being associated with deviation and prostitution. This explains why it is through a reference to his body that he introduces himself: "my body, ji, isn't my own. It's a communal vessel for lust that finds expression

in dark corners. I learned that early in my life, na. I am like the spaces that belong to no one; a dirty thought never acknowledged" (Mansab 2017, 5). At an early age Bhanggi was adopted by the hijra community, where he learnt early on that acceptance in the group necessarily involved submission to its rules. While accepting from an early age his destiny of prostitution, violence and discrimination, he needs to hide from the other members of the community, who are officially hermaphrodites and frequently transgender, his male gender identity. This exposes him to a double form of otherness, which operates both within and outside the community, and renders identification and belonging only partially possible. For this reason, he exemplifies the condition of the hijra community at large characterised by liminality, and a heterogeneous set of practices and of ways of understanding one's belonging to the community (Angelillo 2024, Pamment 2010, Nanda 2003). As pointed out by recent studies on the novel (Sundus and Javed 2020; Taskeen and Mohsin 2018), Bhanggi appears to comply with Judith Butler's theory of the performative nature of gender identity. Born a hermaphrodite he has been induced to adopt the manners and behaviours of the hijras, who perform their gender through a distinct way of exaggerating feminine demeanours (Jaffer 2017). However, the arbitrary nature of his attribution to what is regarded as a third gender is revealed by Bhanggi's spontaneous identification as male. Regardless of his perspective and feelings, he is recognised as a member of a community that has existed in India and Pakistan since remote times, but which has always been marginalised and subjected to discrimination and violence, being a tolerated, but not accepted, exception to patriarchal and moral laws. Even if the biological evidence for the existence of intersexuality today preserves hijras from legal persecution, they remain outcasts in a society that is built around two sexes and gender identities, and that condemns explicitly sexualised behaviours, which the hijras make evident in the form of explicit and vulgar allusions, that are typically seen as a reminder that many of them are involved in prostitution.

As a child, Bhanggi was used to having to escape from young boys harassing and humiliating him in public for being an anomaly, a deviation from the norm. As an adult, he is also regarded as a symbol of vulgarity, of shamelessness and immorality, and he is used to violence and humiliation, as when he gets beaten up at the shrine in front of many believers for refusing a sexual encounter with a man, and everyone just let this happen because he is a hijra.

> He pulled Bhanggi up by his robe and slapped him across his face again and again. [...] "Harami! Kutte! I will throw you out of this sacred place!" [...] People had stopped to watch. They stood in silence. More and more gathered, forming a hesitant circle around the spectacle. No one interfered. The man continued beating Bhanggi. The silence of the crowd seemed to encourage him. He became louder, more abusive." (Mansab 2017, 61)

As Butler maintains, the individuation of bodies deviating from the norm is necessary to keep a system that established heterosexuality as the norm (Butler 1993). Indeed, the identification of what is abnormal contributes to the definition of what is normal and allowed. Bhanggi's function is that of exposing the community to the "unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies" (Butler 1993, xi) that must be rejected as part of the process of identity formation of those who conform to the norm.

Furthermore, as a hijra, Bhanggi is the epitome of the sacrificial victim towards whom repressed sad passions can be directed to alleviate social tensions. Girard's theory

maintains that when the exacerbation of mimetic rivalry leads to chaos, a community needs to identify a scapegoat whose sacrifice will restore social order, releasing pressure by channelling agitation towards a violent act. The widespread perception of hijras as aberrations makes them a perfect and easy target for anyone who needs to unleash their hatred and anger through an act of brutality. This explains the random violence that is exercised by common people against the hijras, which makes public humiliation, beatings and rape part of their everyday life, and which in the most unfortunate cases leads to them being murdered. Although Bhanggi's experience is in this sense archetypal, his death cannot just be explained in terms of the violence generated by frustration and resentment. Rather, it is designed to turn him into a symbol and a warning against any attempt at assailing the social apparatus. Bhanggi is killed by men sent to the shrine by Nida's husband after he has realised his wife's betrayal. As a member of the elite, Saqib is a holder and defender of power and privilege and, as such, he is obliged to preserve these by following the rules of the system. Afraid of failing in his responsibility to provide a model for the rest of the community, whose members likely wish to be like him, he tries to hide those aspects of his private life, concerning Nida and the child, which would tarnish his public image. While Nida's brief relationship with Bhanggi is the act of a woman who rebels against a marriage she experiences as a cage, it is also an act that defies moral, class and gender boundaries representing a challenge to the status quo that cannot be tolerated. Thus, a man afraid of losing his social position as a consequence of what would be a disgraceful scandal resorts to violence to restore the social order. Bhanggi's final sacrifice serves not to appease the resentment of those who have been left behind but to relieve the elite's fear that a private choice may undermine the whole social system.

Conclusions

In the novel, the trajectories of the characters reveal how they suffer and react to the limitations and pressures placed on them by a system which creates the conditions for the domination of sad passions and its consequences. However, although Bhanggi's death epitomises the risks connected with any attempt to defy the existing social mechanisms, the story also suggests that the nurturing of positive feelings, such as love, understanding and solidarity, can empower individuals, opening up spaces for freedom that lie beyond social structures and tensions. It is when Bhanggi and Nida find support in each other that they are able to develop a private dimension where they can disengage from social norms and expectations to the point that Nida finds the courage to openly disrupt the rules. Sasha's trajectory, however, is more ambiguous. Her realisation of her mistakes is also driven by love. When she is finally able to put her motherly love above everything else, she becomes aware of the futility of pursuing a life of material wealth and becomes able to free herself from those mechanisms that have caused her bitterness and frustration. However, she proves unable to overcome certain negative feelings she has for Nida when she ridicules her for loving Bhanggi. In that occasion she also seems to have come to believe that happiness derives from accepting one's own place in society, and the norms it requires to follow, when she tries to take Nida back to her husband, maintaining that only with him she can be happy and feel loved.

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