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## To Exclude or Not to Exclude?: The Question of Nationality as a Category in Queer Studies

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*This paper will try to look at some of the problems of categorisation through the prism of my own reservations and concerns when researching the novel *Babyji* (2005) by Abha Dawesar. The paper will examine whether categories and classifications are capable of including all the exclusions that they purport to remedy. In particular, this paper will examine the usefulness of the term 'queer' and the category of the nationality 'Indian', as well as the simultaneous problems that arise from using the category of nationality in conjunction with queerness. Moreover, it does not implicitly entail that the more categories sprout in the world, the more inclusive the world will be toward queer individuals. The paper will therefore interrogate if there is a way out at all from this conundrum of labelling and binding oneself to these categories. This interrogation is done by challenging the idea that it is easier to think of Dawesar's novel from a monolithic perspective of nationality, while the novel's other facets are conveniently allowed to fade by critics and researchers. To think of *Babyji* as more than just a nationalistic novel, the paper applies Gayatri Spivak's concept of "foreclosure" ("The Intervention Interview" 125). Spivak, borrowing the term from Lacanian psychoanalysis, differentiates foreclosure from exclusion and conceptualises the former "to mean the interested denial of something". By using this term, the paper thus explores other interpretations of *Babyji*, concluding that thinking beyond categories (despite them being a necessary evil) is quite possible.*

LGBTQIA+ and all the letters of the English alphabet, along with other numerical signs, may not be entirely enough to capture the plethora of desires and ways of being that are manifested by individuals across the world. Can categorization ever be enough at all, then? Would it ever be able to include the gaps, the holes, the exclusions? Would exclusions want to be included in those strings of letters in the first place? Who gets to decide? Those who are included or those who are excluded? What happens when nationality, another big category, is cast into this fray of identity categories? These are many complicated questions, thrown around as you begin reading this paper. Continuing to mimic the style of a research paper, I will add that this analysis seeks to try and answer some of these questions to establish the problems inherent in exclusion and inclusion, tying in with the dicey binary of invisibility and visibility. Why must all binaries always be so contentious and problematic? There, I have added a

question again. This paper will try to look at some of these problems through the prism of my own reservations and concerns when researching the novel *Babyji* (2005) by Abha Dawesar. In particular, this paper will examine the usefulness of the term ‘queer’ and the category of the nationality ‘Indian’, as well as the simultaneous problems that arise as a result of using the category of nationality in conjunction with queerness.

At the outset, then, this paper will not be a disquisition on the merits of one term for sexual minorities or queer individuals over another/other term/s. This paper excludes these discussions. However, the term ‘queer’ will be used throughout, chiming in with the sense of ‘queer’ as an umbrella term that is more inclusive than some others. The term itself carries what Geeta Patel calls “a whiff of complexity” (138) and, because of that, refuses to be bound to any static, stable category alone—which is why the term is a useful one to denote inclusiveness. Yet, to the term ‘queer’, several telling, seemingly fixed adjective categories themselves can be affixed, such as (in the context of India) Dalit, Indian, Muslim, urban, rural, north-eastern, south Indian, and so on and so forth. Even when jotting this laundry list of categories right now, there arises in me an aversion to those letters, to those words. I am aware of how those letters and words, just by being written down on this page, in this Microsoft Word document, are performing the action of both including some of the individuals who belong to those categories while also simultaneously excluding some who might roughly come under the ambit of those categories, but not belong entirely, or feel only a partial belonging to those forenamed categories that can be easily attached to the term ‘queer’.

This aversion also includes the manner in which I feel appalled at how the five seemingly innocent words, “so on and so forth”, are supposed to be capacious enough for all the different categories out there but can only hint at and not outright include all those categories. These affixations are also often a peculiar feature only among those who do not belong to the universal sense of queerness embodied by (dare I say it out loud?) the white, privileged man of the Global North. Yet, queerness has been reclaimed by many diverse groups all across the world, which has to some extent diluted the habitation of ‘gay’ by White male identity and behaviour alone. The reclamations burst the bubble of any kind of false premise of a universal queerness. However, it does not implicitly entail that the more categories sprout and erupt in the world, the more inclusive the world will be toward sexual minorities. Is there a way out at all from this conundrum of labelling and naming and binding oneself to these categories? There goes another question out there into the world.

Jyoti Puri remarks on the field of the law creating an aporia in two ways: “the extent to which biases inherent in existing laws can be mitigated through law reform; the extent to which legal reform can be the means for social change” (216). It is not a new fact that legal change does not automatically lead to social change and that one needs to go beyond the legal realm as well. As Gayatri Spivak notes in one of her public lectures, “Changing the laws, however, is not the same thing as teaching the general public to will the law, to want the law. As long as the law is predicated on enforcement, it is the same world, perhaps superficially changed, always observed, precarious, ready to revert any moment” (“Can There be a Feminist World?”). Yet, she doesn’t imply that no legal reform should be forthcoming. What matters is that public perceptions and comprehensions around issues also change along with the law. For example, queer activism in India began with the agitation around removing the colonial and archaic Section 377 that criminalised all ‘unnatural sex’. Reading down Section 377 by the Supreme Court in its landmark judgement in 2018 was hailed by all activists and allies as a positive step in a more progressive direction (Virk). Yet, this crucial judgement does not immediately proliferate social change, such that all queer individuals will now be safer in India. Threats persist, so do prejudices, and so then does that legal aporia. Do we change the law if it doesn’t lead to social change?

This paper will now look at another aporia, not in terms of the legal sphere, but in terms of literature, specifically in relation to the novel *Babyji* by Abha Dawesar. In *Babyji*, the author zeroes in on the queer coming of age of the 16-year-old protagonist, Anamika Sharma, who is living in Delhi in the 1980s. Dawesar portrays this queering of Anamika’s coming of age through several processes: by Anamika reading the taboo ancient Hindu book, *Kamasutra*; through her own physical relations and experiences of touch with the three other women she forms relationships with (the three women are named India, Rani, and Sheela); through Hindi movies (and problematically through the male villains in those movies); from her range of literary readings (Dawesar shows Anamika’s reading list ranging from Austen to Ayn Rand, from Ray Bradbury to Milan Kundera—and Sartre, too); and, lastly, through her comprehension of science concepts from her school subjects, such as chemistry, mathematics, and physics.

Dawesar’s premise is promising and she does an excellent job of showcasing and highlighting the intricate and complex lives of girls at school. Hence, the author challenges the predominant and still-existing notion that, for school-going girls, what matters is only being good at studies rather than exploring the raging, boundless curiosity within, including sexual

curiosity. Dawesar has also set the novel in a specific milieu: urban Delhi in the 1980s, where Anamika belongs to the Brahmin caste and is a comfortable middle-class person. Given that the novel is quite visibly fitted to Indian contexts, it is easy to conceptualise and categorise the book as an ‘Indian queer novel’. One of the finer points of the novel is the way in which Anamika comprehends her desires through a mix and match of different sources, which allows the plot to interrogate another predominant stereotype: that modes of being queer emanate only from the Global North. However, given that Anamika christens one of her partners ‘India’ (whose real name is Tripta Adhikari), it is possible to slip into an easy analysis of how the novel speaks to the intersections of queer desires and nationality. Undoubtedly the novel does do this: looking at ways in which patriotic love can collide with queer love or how caste sensibilities can shape an individual’s understanding of the world. The latter rings especially true with Anamika. One of the other prominent contexts in which Dawesar embeds the narrative is the announcement of one of the Mandal Commission’s recommendations being accepted: reserving seats in higher educational institutes for Other Backward Castes (OBCs). Anamika, like other Brahmins who may be harmed by such a decision, is incensed and does not support the announcement, falsely securing her beliefs to the idea of merit. As she explains her understanding to her classmate-cum-love interest, Sheela, “Reservations are for those who won’t make it on merit” (148). Anamika does not take into account how her caste, class, and urban status enable her certain privileges that are erroneously coded as ‘merit.’

Like Anamika’s assertion of the merits of ‘merit’, there are several elements that are problematic in the novel, such as Dawesar’s portrayal of Anamika as a rapist, or Anamika modelling herself on Howard Roark (the individualist and misogynistic protagonist of Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*) and Hindi movie villains, or Anamika’s strange power dynamics with her three simultaneous partners. But surely these wouldn’t be the only ways in which queer love among women can be expressed. Is this only one facet of the multifarious and multifaceted ways of expressing queerness? I felt like a native informant, trying to unearth what it means to be Indian and queer as I researched this novel. I use the term ‘native informant’ not in terms of Spivak’s early definition of “a name for that mark of expulsion from the name of Man [...]” (“A Critique” 6). Rather, I use the term in the later understanding of how “the diasporic stands in for the native informant” (169). What’s more is that, as a Ph.D. student from India, studying temporarily on a student visa in a foreign country, I am not ‘diasporic’ yet in the traditional sense of the term. I myself inhabit an amorphous space of being at many places at once and being aware of the several occurrences happening in myriad places that have also

become a part of me. I have, to make a bold declaration, always felt liminal, whether it was back home in the city I was born in or in other parts of the country.

I don't think, then, that liminality or being stuck between cultures/countries can only be the unfortunate privilege of the migrant/immigrant/refugee alone. Yet, what I write and provide can sometimes be viewed as "a site that can only *be* read, by definition, for the production of definitive descriptions" (Spivak, "A Critique" 49; emphasis in original). So, I am diasporic not in terms of identity category but in terms of the work I produce, affirming the pressing need to assuage the anxiety of fulfilling boundless diversity within academia. Is it truly boundless, though, if what I am going to be producing will only end up forming "definitive descriptions", such as 'Indian queerness means this and this and only this?' And therein lies the aporia of using categories: that they are important, since the act of naming bestows a power that enables one to overcome the constant sense of being ashamed, of being an outsider (as a queer person); yet, at the same time, those categories can feel limiting, binding one to their restraining boundaries.

Dawesar does not portray Anamika labelling herself as lesbian, queer, or gay throughout the novel. Anamika is shown probing the contours of some of these labels (especially the generic sense of the term 'gay') but never calls herself any of these terms. Anamika is also polyamorous, though Dawesar never uses this precise term either. Anamika navigates and understands the dynamics of her three simultaneous relationships not through that one term but through an incisive delving into her own thoughts, particularly when she comes to realise that "we'd spent two thousand years only to find out that we didn't know" which leads her to then accept the fact that "only feelings counted. And sensations" (22). Her teenage self then starts to act on those very feelings and sensations, leading her to explore her queerness and forms of love and intimacy through three different women. Dawesar portrays Anamika as inhabiting a liminal space within her three relationships as she is both all-consumed by and very much present within each of the three relationships, extracting different experiences or prioritising certain desires over another with each of her three partners. For example, with Rani and India, Anamika explores the contours of intimacy and power. Being intimate with India signals Anamika's first tryst with coming of age, as Anamika remarks: "Squeezing India's rear [...] made me an adult" (30). With Rani, Anamika experiences her intimacy through her first kiss, but Anamika's intimacy with Rani is also mixed with the power dynamics of caste since Rani is from the lower Yadav caste and works as a maid at their house, while Anamika is a Brahmin. On the other hand, Anamika finds Sheela to be a "challenge" as, unlike Rani or India, Sheela

is not taken up by Anamika's charms quite as easily (153). Furthermore, it is only with Sheela that Dawesar shows Anamika conjuring a future: "I would earn a lot of money, and Sheela would take care of the house" (125).

There is a dispersal of Anamika's sense of self within these relations and a paradoxical convergence of self through multiple, intertextual references. Her name in Hindi means 'nameless', or 'the one without a name', denoting a blank slate, a self that cannot be easily pinned down to one concrete identity construct and, more importantly, a self that is ready to absorb from the world around her. Her world is influenced by inflections from her city and her nation, as well as the wider world, particularly at a time when India was poised for the New Economic Policy to come into force and usher in an era of liberalisation in the 1990s. This led to further opening up of media outlets where people could embrace and take part in cultural and media exchanges from all over the world, particularly the soft power of hegemonic American popular culture.

The point of choosing this as one of the books for my Ph.D. work was to highlight the myriad influences that shaped Anamika's behaviours, sense of self, and identity. Her coming of age is queer both in the sense that she expresses her love and desire for other women but also in the wider sense of the term's capacity to encompass and engage with scattered multiplicities of the self. Yet, while I want to talk about how Anamika's coming of age is queered by the inclusion of several influences, I fear that labelling and talking about the Indianness in Anamika's queerness would paradoxically exclude the novel's multifaceted feature and play right into Frederic Jameson's confounding formulation that all works of third world literature are national allegories: "Third-world texts [...] necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory" (69). The danger of a novel being fossilised within the political nationality category alone is far greater for a book from the Global South, or what Jameson generalises as "third world", than for a book from the Global North. For example, Imre Szeman's cleverly titled essay, "Who's Afraid of National Allegory? Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization", tries to elucidate Jameson's arguments but ends up justifying the problematic essentialist divisions of private versus public, and third world versus first world, such that the national allegory itself becomes a valid "mode of interpretation" (814). Yes, undoubtedly it is a mode of interpretation; yet, the sweeping generalisation that all literary productions coming from specific locations must be read through this mode has to be challenged much more deeply and in conjunction with broader conversations about world literature and decolonisation.

It is easier to think of Dawesar's novel from that monolithic perspective, its other facets conveniently allowed to fade by critics and researchers. This is, in a sense, borrowing from Spivak, a kind of "foreclosure" ("The Intervention Interview" 125). Spivak, borrowing the term from Lacan's psychoanalysis, differentiates foreclosure from exclusion and conceptualises the former "to mean the interested denial of something" ("The Intervention Interview" 125). But what is being denied in this case, when thinking of the novel as being set or based in India? Denial of the multiplicity of selves, influences, and intertextualities that the author highlights in the novel. Denial of the idea that a nation is a "collection of ideas at best, appearing in a different configuration for each one encountering it at any given moment" (Bose vii). The labelling portends that the novel will be read as possessing "overweening metaphors for 'the nation'" (vii). Secondly, why would this denial be "interested"? It is useful to look at Spivak's explanation again as she clarifies that the interested denial is "of something that is present crucially and in excess." (Spivak, "The Intervention Interview" 125). In this case, the Eurocentric prevalence of nationality that has percolated throughout the world because of the mechanisms of capitalism and imperialism is what continues to remain in excess (Anderson 37). Nationality has become not only an essential way of understanding the world and its people, but also an essential way for the people to understand themselves and assign themselves an identity; Henry Ergas rightly opens his essay with the remark, "All of us alive were born into a world of nation-states" (105). It becomes "interested" because the ulterior motive is to see identities through this monochromatic lens of nationality, rather than attempting to diffuse that monochromatism itself.

In *Babyji*, Dawesar depicts Anamika as being patriotic in the very first chapter, as Anamika says in hindsight that she was young, innocent, and filled with "the ambition to do something great for my country" (6). Anna Guttman calls Anamika's patriotism "naïve nationalism" and believes that this is the reason for Anamika to nickname Tripta as India in the first place (696). Indeed, as mentioned earlier, Anamika often conflates Tripta with the country India: Anamika reveals to Tripta that one reason she nicknamed her India was because "I felt the kind of love I feel for the whole country, not just for one part" (138). This confession unravels how Anamika's love for her country seeps into her love for this person as well. Yet, in the first chapter, where Anamika meets India for the first time, Anamika thinks of India (i.e., Tripta) as "an enigma" because she couldn't place her, which made India (the person) "rife with possibility, rich in her meanings and bountiful" (9). And this is despite the fact that Anamika states just before that India is "a nation of taxonomists", and that its people (including



Anamika) love categorising everyone, whether they are “English-speaking or not, meat-eating or not, if vegetarian then whether an eggetarian [sic] or strict [...]” (9). Thus, while Guttman conceptualises Anamika’s nationalism as naïve, I wouldn’t think of it as completely naïve and childlike as Anamika is able to challenge several of these categorising tendencies that make one ‘Indian’, so to speak. India, the person, seems to defy any of those categories that the nation loves putting onto people and hence was nicknamed as such by Anamika because Anamika also states that she loves India the country for all its contradictions and fierceness (138). Hence, for Anamika, the idea of the nation itself seems to be one that is not fixed at all, and she sees this lack of fixity as something that should be cherished. Anamika cherishes such lack of fixity through her love for Tripta as well, who in being an enigma is equally hard to fix to specific categories. Given the lack of any terms that Dawesar uses to talk about Anamika's love for Tripta, yoking in an unfixed nationalism to understand Anamika's feelings for the older woman offers a way to understand queerness without necessarily naming that love as such. To show Anamika's love, Dawesar uses one category of identity, that of nationality, over another identity marker.

Instead of thinking of Anamika as a naïve nationalist, it would be more useful and critical to think of Anamika as showing a naïve casteism that is also the site where her patriotism meets. While the author never explicitly shows Anamika inhabiting or affiliating herself with different queer identity categories, Dawesar portrays Anamika repeatedly associating herself with her Brahmin caste identity by explicitly saying that she is a Brahmin, or by possessing that caste category through the use of ‘my’, showing a sense of possession over that caste identity (200). This recurrent assertion of caste identity unravels how this identity marker is significant for Anamika, that there is a level of fixity that she prefers to attach to this identity. Yet, while Anamika thinks that the lower-caste-affirming Mandal reservation policy is incorrect, she distances herself from the young Brahmin youths who self-immolate to protest the policy. Anamika believes burning oneself is not a solution, and as she tells her father, “It’s self-centred and ridiculous to set yourself on fire”; instead of choosing to self-immolate, which is not rational behaviour according to her, it is instead better to “throw out the government” (200). However, Anamika’s caste entitlement remains naïve. Rather than engage with the pros and cons of the Mandal Commission recommendations or think about her own privileges and how she benefits from them, she would rather just topple governments. So, even though it is commendable that Anamika is able to understand the follies and impermanence of self-immolation (“Turning into carbon for the sake of some political drama everyone would forget

in a few months was entirely out of the question” [202]), Dawesar does not show Anamika using her otherwise keen and incisive intelligence to critique her own position vis-à-vis her caste. Anamika’s patriotism and her Indianness are deeply tied in with her caste identity, which she thinks of in more fixed terms than her more diffused way of comprehending nationality and sexuality.

The yoking of ‘Indian’ and ‘queer’ together thus plays right into a trap of foreclosure, where these two big categories constrain and confine readers’ outlooks toward what Indian queerness is and means, and assign the yoked categories a single definitive meaning. Taking the combined category one category at a time has revealed that the term ‘Indian’ itself is always rife with contradictions and conflict. Ashwini Sukthankar also grapples with affixing several of these categories together in the introduction to her seminal edited anthology, *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*. Similarly, while I write to try and puncture assumed seamless congruities of how queerness is expressed, I don’t mind being thought of as being Indian, if “to be Indian is to write with a knowledge of this country, and to relate to its particular freedoms and restrictions and properties from that perspective” (Sukthankar xix). What I object to is being situated as instinctively wanting to give voice to a marginalised queerness that is being crushed under the burden of unrestricted prejudice and homophobia within the country and that this ability to voice it out through my work was only possible because of a diasporic location. Furthermore, I object to the mechanical construction of my work as any kind of monolithic allegory for the nation.

The whole point of my thesis is to bring to the fore different primary texts where the characters revel and struggle in their queer desires and their queer love. The whole point is to make that paradoxical and fragmented celebration and struggle visible. But the point is definitely not to unreservedly affirm that these texts are ‘authentic’ versions of that queer love. The point is also not to affirm that queerness is shifting in these texts from the inauthentic to something more authentic because “the two [are] rarely brought into relationship with one another” (Patel 141). Yet, visibility always dangles its double-edged sword of hiding and excluding something when making something else visible. “The named marginal is as much a concealment as a disclosure of the margin, and where s/he discloses, s/he is singular” (Spivak, “A Critique” 173). Through the focus of my work, then, I am well aware that I am also concretising the Indianness of queerness, naming the marginal, concealing it at the same time, and also perhaps dangerously close to veering towards a singular notion of that Indianness. Of course, what I want to do is the opposite, and this need to achieve the opposite perhaps also

stems from the exigency to break entitled ideas on both sides: the Global North's notion that queerness originates from their own shadowy realms and, back home (ironically a different version of that same argument), the idea that queerness travels in from outside, from so-called Western influences alone. Thus, I want to challenge the supposed seamless continuity of queerness travelling from the Global North to the rest of the world clubbed indiscriminately as the Global South. At the same time, I do not want to posit that only one way of being 'Indian and queer' is prevalent. This is something I am especially loath to do particularly because of the current strategic and systematic right-wing political re-structuring within India that is bulldozing nations within nations, only so that they can construct a hegemonic Hindutva national identity. I am loath to let go of that famed utopic diversity of my country, and by labelling my thesis and *Babyji* in particular, I do not want to deny or foreclose other possibilities of interpreting, writing about, and expressing queer love among women.

Thus, the crucial question remains: how does one guarantee that this foreclosure will not take place? Should one not use the term Indian at all, then? There are certain conditions that necessitate the term's usage, mostly the limitations of language itself that are unable to include and name multiple, alternative ways of being, experiencing, and understanding, and more so because of the centrality of the epistemology of the nation and nationality in the twenty-first century. Supurna Bhaskaran uses the term "curdled others" to refer to people of colour in the U.S. anthropology field (15). She explains how they are caught in a bind where their identity categories often 'colour' their field work as they are expected to base the field work on the methodology of essentialising experiences. Yet, at the same time, these experiences would be discredited because they are based on experiences and not a mastery of the field. So, not only are they always stuck within identity binaries, they are constantly caught in a vicious loop of the experience versus mastery binary as well. This is the kind of essentialism I want to avoid being labelled for as a researcher. I would not want my work to be just another curdled, othered, marginal, and essentialist piece of work that solely exists to validate a Global North audience's queer-originating claims, or to create just an overarching brand of Indianness that is queer. These are what cause the aforementioned foreclosure, too, in the first place. Moreover, these lines of thought are what perpetually doubly bind me inside a seesaw of trying to establish an alternative way of imagining queerness whilst also resisting any concretising of that very same queer alterity.

One perhaps cannot exclude oneself from the categories, and cannot avoid (or foreclose?) using them in everyday life and in research. But the takeaway shouldn't be to completely

exclude or discredit these categories. Exclusions can occur in degrees, too, and not in a blanketing gesture alone. One need not have to completely overcome this naming aporia or the aporia brought by using categories, but be vigilant and cognizant enough that labels cannot encompass everything all at once; that in the very act of a creation of the label/s, something is always missed out, which then falls through gaps and holes and loops, being lost forever. The same goes for the term 'queer': though this label aspires to encompass all and sundry under its umbrella wings, it can be disconcerting for certain individuals who feel that the elements of specific categories get lost under this umbrella's shade! In the end, using the term 'Indian' is like a *majboori* (a helpless compulsion) because, like all categories, this one has been known to be inclusive, but also known to be too imposing, and worse, downright exclusionary, depending on whom, when, and where this idea of the nation is being constructed.

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