
FROM MENO-PAUSE TO MENO(PLAY): NEW DELHI AND THE *INDIAN TANGO*ROHINI BANNERJEE
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rohini.bannerjee@smu.caReceived:14-01-2017
Accepted:02-02-2017**ABSTRACT**

Since 1989, Ananda Devi, one of Mauritius' most prolific Francophone writers, has been writing female protagonists who go beyond what Roland Barthes says is the deformed and mythical image of the female, and in the case of Ananda Devi's 2007 novel, *Indian Tango*, of the aging female. Set in modern New Delhi, a city pulled in multiple directions by politics, religion and globalization, we will examine how Subhadra, mother, wife, daughter-in-law and soon to be grandmother, attempts to reclaim her individuality now replaced by the social isolation of menopause, that is, "par la représentation du vide...". Subhadra exhumes her female body ignored by her husband and shamed by her mother-in-law along the streets of India's capital and consequently undergoes a sexual (re) awakening for which neither she nor her family is prepared. This paper will examine how Devi's female protagonist-outcast uses the sounds and rhythms of the urban complexities of New Delhi to denounce ideologies rooted in patriarchal traditions and restrictions and thus rejecting assumptions that menopausal women are asexual and undesirable and consequently underlines how a walk around a New Delhi block in fact (re) defines menopause for Subhadra as a time of liberation and sexual discovery.

KEYWORDS: Ananda Devi, sexuality, menopause, feminism, Francophonie, New Delhi, queer studies, diaspora

RESUMEN *De la menopausia al meno(juego). Nueva Delhi y el **Tango indio***

Desde 1989, Ananda Devi, una de las más fecundas escritoras en lengua francesa, ha estado escribiendo sobre protagonistas femeninas que van más allá, según Roland Barthes, de la contrahecha e imaginaria imagen de la mujer y, en el caso de Ananda Devi en su novela de 2007, *Indian Tango*, del envejecimiento de la mujer. La novela transcurre en la moderna Nueva Delhi, una ciudad en conflicto con diversas direcciones políticas, por la religión y la globalización. Examinamos como Subhadra, madre, esposa, nuera y pronto abuela, intenta reclamar su individualismo ahora substituido por el estigma social de la menopausia "par la representation du vide...". Subhadra libera su cuerpo femenino ignorado por su marido y ridiculizado por su suegra a través de las calles de la capital india y consecuentemente experimenta un (re)despertar sexual para el que ni ella ni su familia están preparados. Este artículo analizará cómo la repudiada protagonista de Devi usa los sonidos y ritmos de la compleja urbanización de Nueva Delhi para denunciar las ideología más profunda en las tradiciones patriarcales y las restricciones sociales y, de esta forma, rechaza la suposición de que las mujeres que pasan por la menopausia carecen de atractivo sexual y son indeseables y demuestra de una forma muy explícita, casi como un paseo por los alrededores de Nueva Delhi, que para Subhadra la menopausia es una forma de liberación y descubrimiento sexual.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ananda Devi, sexualidad, menopausia, feminismo, francofonía, Nueva Delhi, teoría queer, diáspora

Introduction

Since 1989, Ananda Devi, one of Mauritius' most prolific Francophone writers, has been writing female protagonists who go beyond what Roland Barthes says is the deformed and mythical image of the female, and in the case of Ananda Devi's 2007 novel, *Indian Tango*, the archetype of the aging female. Women protagonists have dominated Devi's works, often revealing to us the authentic experience of the Indo-Franco-Mauritian woman, one that straddles several cultures, religions, languages and patriarchal obligations. Devi's female characters are given opportunities to break these societal chains so as to find their own freedom of expression, in accordance with their desires and passions.

Ananda Devi declares, "I ask the foreign reader to take a step towards me [...] to accept that some aspects will be foreign and strange for him/her, but that this will not prevent him/her from following the novel's path and understanding it" (Caputo, 2015: 134). As the title *Indian Tango* infers and Devi affirms, "I'm under the impression of being in a certain way "complete" with regards to Western (Tango) as well as Eastern culture (Indian) because I have access to both of them in an intimate way, and beyond culture, to the streams of thoughts of great civilizations" (Caputo, 2015: 133). The novel *Indian Tango* follows the life of Subhadra Misra, an Indian woman living in Delhi, 52 years of age, in the early stages of menopause. Menopause, a crisis, as described by Simone de Beauvoir, feminist pioneer author of *Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex)*, "brutally cuts feminine life into two: it is this discontinuity that gives woman the illusion of a "new life" (de Beauvoir, 1949: 620).

Subhadra is a woman with several responsibilities, none of which are to care for her own mental or physical health, but are rather obligations to live her own contradictions and conflicts in silence. Firstly, Subhadra's primary duty is her marriage to Jugdish, a man, who represents as de Beauvoir notes, "patriarchal society that has made all feminine functions servile" (de Beauvoir, 1949: 624). Subhadra's conjugal bed is one of night sweats and discomfort and Jugdish comments, "You know you are not well, touching the bedsheets massacred by the night spent with Subhadra. Ma might be right. Go see a gynecologist" (Devi, 2007: 56).¹

¹ My own translation from the original French text.

Subhadra's response is not what Jugdish expected and she adds, with a tone of distinct acerbity, "If that is what it is, there is no reason to go see anyone. What will happen will happen, she murmured. Sorry, this is the prize given to all women" (Devi, 2007: 56). We read further on that Subhadra awaits for husband to console her and to reassure her that her age is but a number in the lunar calendar, telling her that she is still fresh, vibrant, alive. But, Devi bursts that optimistic bubble reminding us that Jugdish "[...] simply shakes his head" (Devi, 2007: 56). The scene closes with Subhadra returning to the robotic and imposed familiarity of the kitchen "[...] with anticipation of this automatic act that will mask the emptiness of her own spirit. The odor of the mint, coriander, *kari pattam*, all of this gives the impression of order. The meals give semblance of sense and utility to her life" (Devi, 2007: 56-57).

This reference to her mother-in-law's suspicion that she is menopausal is explained by De Beauvoir as follows, "[...] she spies on her daughter-in-law, she criticizes her [...]" (de Beauvoir, 1949: 624). *Mataji* in fact has advised her son Jugdish of Subhadra's obligation to partake in the pilgrimage to Benares with her and their spinster cousin. The narrative defines this as a "[...] consolation to menopausal women, to make peace with the gods. Enter the club of the aged woman in white. Washing oneself in the Ganges will not only heal the cataracts in their eyes but equally wash away any bit of desire of life they have on their skin, like some sort of illness or growing mildew that should be washed away" (Devi, 2007: 58). For Subhadra, her mother-in-law is controlling her son and consequently Subhadra and is unsympathetic to Subhadra's changing body. Subhadra's irritation of *Mataji* quickly evolves into anger whilst in the kitchen preparing a meal as per her marital obligation, "Her hand that was kneading the *chapatti atta* furiously stopped. She asked herself. At what time does a woman's femininity go back to the beginning? Her hand locked itself in the *atta* in which she remained a prisoner" (Devi, 2007: 58).

Un-pausing meno(pause)

With a husband who ignores her body and a mother-in-law who shames it, Subhadra makes one last attempt to find justification to remain in her marriage via her son. As de Beauvoir notes, the menopausal mother "sees her little ones become adults. It is the very instant they are escaping her that she passionately attempts to live through them" (de Beauvoir, 1949: 626).

Subhadra thinks she knows her son Kamal, a college student recently expelled from campus for his political ideology and whose friends have suffered police brutality at a protest. In fact, her ignorance ascends immediately when attempting to converse with her son, “ ‘What protest Kamal?’ ‘What protest? What planet do you live on?’ exclaims Kamal” (Devi, 2007: 91). Subhadra realizes that Kamal sees her as the uninformed and oblivious parental figure. Kamal’s frustration turns to action, writes Devi, “He left. Where he once was, the emptiness was deafening” (Devi, 2007: 93). Subhadra sees but the beginning of the end:

Mataji is leaving for her pilgrimage. Jugdish is in the office, Kamal is following his own path. The apparatus of the home is working and functioning. The only part that is not working is her. No one really misses her. Is she a disappearance? Hardly. In order to disappear, you actually have to be. (Devi, 2007: 94).

De Beauvoir reminds us that Subhadra’s desire to understand the transition from maturity to old age is really all part of the natural aging process, “Woman escapes slavery only when she loses all productivity” (de Beauvoir, 1949: 626). This means Subhadra needs to read her cold conjugal bed as a means to an escape, and that in fact it is she who has the capacity to turn off her *chapatti tawa*² and leave. No chapattis means no productivity and thus, as explains de Beauvoir, emancipation. Away from routine or as Subhadra declares the “habit [which] is the gangrene that gnaws on families” (Devi, 2007: 94).

As philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler reminds us, identity categories, such as wife, daughter-in-law, and mother in the case of Subhadra, “tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structure or as the rallying points for a liberating contestation of that very oppression” (Butler, 1991: 14). Subhadra chooses to break the habit, cut off the gangrene, leave behind the *tawa* and contest the assumed misery of her life. As she enters the elevator to descend to the first floor of her apartment building she notes:

The elevator is working. Her legs, she just realized, are wobbling. Her knees are fragile, ravaged by arthritis. In the elevator mirror, she discerns a woman. She says out loud her name, Subhadra Misra. But she is not convinced that really is her. There are some metamorphosis which are deemed irreversible. Voyages outside of the self from which we never return. (Devi, 2007: 14).

Subhadra sets off on a journey of self-discovery framed by broad analytic strokes that glide the

² Traditional pan used to cook *chappatis*.

details of desire. She no longer chooses to “swim, according to her, in a distressing liquid” (Devi, 2007: 106) of her husband’s cynicism, be constrained by her mother-in-law’s white sari, be dismissed by her son’s childhood. However, with reference to Devi’s title, *Indian Tango*, it is to be reiterated that it does take two to tango. Who shall be her dance partner? Is this self-discovery actually with or because of someone else?

Composing her-their meno(play)

In fact, there is a surrogate storyline at play in *Indian Tango*. A nameless female character, “je,” a writer from Mauritius who travels to Delhi looking for inspiration to write, and is searching for a new storyline, a narrative for herself. This nameless writer has noticed Subhadra, bewildered and lost, standing outside a musical shop in Delhi, admiring a sitar. “I see an ordinary woman, one we see all over Delhi. She put the end-tail of her sari back on her shoulders. Under the finesse of the tissue, the low-cut neckline of her blouse revealed an ample bosom. Maybe she doesn’t realize her own beauty” (Devi, 2007: 26).

Ritu Tyagi explains that Devi uses a “complex narrative with neither focal consciousness nor steady unfolding of a plot” (Tyagi, 2013: 112). What we learn is that the nameless writer has *created* this character of Subhadra, or as she later names her, Bimala, as a figure of her imagination, one the nameless writer can rescue from a society that dismisses female sexuality. This Subhadra/Bimala amalgam, in essence, is not the main character of Devi’s novel but an imagined character written by the actual protagonist, the nameless Mauritian writer, “je.” This ambiguity between what is real, the Mauritian writer walking through New Delhi, and the imagined Subhadra/Bimala also wandering New Delhi enables us, the reader, to break both literary and cultural barriers and transcend patriarchal and sexual boundaries so as to connect with each of these characters, each of who are free to exist and love in any way they wish, a freedom that according to Tyagi, “can only be availed in fiction, not in reality” (Tyagi, 2013: 115). The nameless writer declares, “for once, placing myself in the story, I am becoming the subject of my own story” (Devi, 2007: 82).

The intertwining of these two storylines, one of menopausal Subhadra/Bimala looking to embrace her new corporal state as a new-found femininity and that of an imposed widowhood from normal life and of the nameless writer looking to re-construct a fictitious female protagonist’s broken sexual identity through fiction and language as a form of erotic self-

pleasure for herself speaks to the actual hither and thither of the tango itself, is emphasized in the title of the novel. The plot is unsteady and often incomprehensible, possibly like a dance of passion, such as the tango, choreographed by sexuality but then that goes off script and becomes a discovery of self, a dance made authentic with the sensuality of Devi's poetic language, in the transgression of the imaginary, a dance between writer and reader. As for Judith Butler, "pleasure is produced by the instability of the lesbian category (Butler, 1991: 15). Devi's poetic plume revisits this notion:

Ink, plume, words, all of this will leave my body and will be written on hers. What better paper than that of the virginal skin of a woman? And what beautiful poetry than one written by the language on her body. My metaphors are climactic and I love them. (Devi, 2007: 83).

The celebration of the body both derived and via the act of writing, the breaking free from imposed patriarchal limits of feminine sexuality leads us to a literary and spiritual tango, a tango no longer where the man leads, when performed "[...] by a same-sex couple, [where] each partner takes turns leading the dance. The power is shared equally and the dance is harmonious" (Tyagi, 2013: 117). Devi successfully writes a similar dance between the two female characters constructing a narrative in collaboration. This layered narration destabilizes the traditional heterosexual binary definition of a man-woman tango to weave a new, complex, unconventional and authentic one. This intimate dance with steps framed in method and rhythm but fueled by passion and sexual tension, confuses the reader. As de Beauvoir explains, "homosexuality for women is one attempt among others to reconcile her autonomy with the passivity of her flesh" (de Beauvoir, 1949: 635). *Indian Tango* is in contrast to popular images of lesbian identity as inverted or masculinized woman, in fact, there is an ambivalence of legibility of being lesbian, no explicit conformity, returning to Lucie Irigaray's articulation of female sexuality as multivalent. How can Subhadra/Bimala go from undesired Hindu housewife, shameful daughter-in-law and ignorant mother to an imagined object of desire for a wandering *pardesi*³ lesbian writer? A state of fusion and confusion reminding us that, it takes two to tango, a suggestion that both dancers, both characters, both feminine bodies, need each other.

³ Hindi word meaning foreign.

Dancing in New Delhi

If Devi's literary image of the tango is represented as the intersection and intertwining of these two females in search of themselves, then her chosen dance floor is an ideal one, New Delhi.

I am walking in the street of Delhi and the world bursts from this sun that shoots out of the crack in the clouds and splashes its mockery on the heads of the poor. Delhi is a bursting sun; it bleeds everywhere. What I am looking for, from this moment on, is this taste on my lips. Nothing else can satisfy me. I am walking in Delhi, swimming in its juices, in its saliva, in its moods: a body, a flesh, a flare, senses and then nothing else. Here, I understand to what point the needs of the body are sovereign...I did not know that by coming here, I would encounter not only music but the taste of women. (Devi, 2007: 20).

New Delhi, both resplendent and despondent, cutting-edge and immovable by history, is described in the novel as equally ugly and beautiful, a feminine space. With the joining of opposing temporal and sexual universes of both the nameless writer and that of Subhadra/Bimala, New Delhi serves as the ideal, the multi-subjective space by which these marginalized female voices may be expressed. Ananda Devi's poetic plume inks the page with the description of a personified Delhi, "[f]inding time for desire. Searching the hollows, the incomprehensibility, the crevices. Disturbing the smooth acoustics of one skin to another." (Devi, 2007: 25), a being to discover by walking its streets and alleys, like curves of perhaps a woman's body, a city tugged herself in multiple directions by politics, religion and globalization.

As Jean Claude Abada Medjo recaps, "Delhi, a metaphor for modern India, full of vitality and contradictions, is an anonymous timespace, where nothing is permanent and fixed, where many feel obliged to cite a long geographical geneology to prove their existence and justification for occupying space in Delhi" (Medjo, 2013).⁴ Both Subhadra and the nameless writer can hold no claim to the city but luxuriate this anonymity to (re) write their new identities where gender, caste, hormone levels, cooking obligations or family names make no difference, as outlines Medjo, "[i]n a city of almost 16 million inhabitants, it is not important. Everything becomes relative" (Medjo, 2013). The state of menopause for Subhadra allows uncertainty, explained by de Beauvoir, because "the boundary between the imaginary and the real is even less distinct in this troubled period than during puberty" (de Beauvoir, 1949: 626). New Delhi is an

⁴ My own translation from original French text.

ideal space for these women with its own troubled alley ways and (un) realistic societal obligations.

Unclear conclusions

Nancy P. Nenno reminds us that if “the object of desire always remains out of reach, it is created only through language” (Nenno, 1998: 214). This is Ananda Devi’s invitation to her readers, to engage in the musical dance of language, of flesh, of sexuality, of rebirth. We see Subhadra and later revealed as Bimala, as the woman that:

[...] deliberately seeks to live the romances she has not experienced and that soon she will no longer be able to experience. She leaves her home, both because it seems unworthy of her and because she desires solitude as well as the chance to see adventure. If she finds it, she throws herself into it greedily (de Beauvoir, 1949: 624).

This can be seen as true for both intertwining tango dancers, Subhadra with her ample bosom trapped in a claustrophobic and sexless marriage, and the nameless writer searching to break her writer’s block via the experience of a female body as Adrienne Rich, essayist and feminist, explains, an experience on the lesbian continuum, a range “through each woman’s life and throughout history – of women-identified experience” (Rich, 1980: 633).

Readers eagerly respond to Devi’s celebration of the maturity not only of the feminine body in its menopausal state but a certain maturity of her own writing, one that, according to Jeeveeta Agnihotri, “has crystalized from the time of Devi’s previous novels where we saw more fantasies of feminine redefining the flesh, eroticism and woman” (Agnihotri, 2008). The female protagonist-outcasts awoken by Ananda Devi’s francophone plume, whether one is fictionalized by another or not, use the sounds and rhythms of the urban complexities of New Delhi to denounce ideologies rooted in patriarchal traditions and restrictions and thus rejecting assumptions that menopausal women are asexual and undesirable. From a meno(pause) of patriarchal obligation to a new meno(play) of self-discovery, *Indian Tango* is a fine example of every curve and crevice of the feminine body, space and plume.

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