

discourses



# DISCOURSES

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## DISCOURSES: EDITORIAL STATEMENT

Invisibility. The problem of invisibility for all people of color is the one bloody constant you could add to death and taxes. To analyze, categorize, deconstruct and reconstruct are familiar options – but to remedy? We choose the final option and hope that *Discourses* might help erase the problem that attempts to erase us.

*Discourses* is a journal that presents critical viewpoints on politics, literary analysis, cultural criticism, and the visual arts as they relate to the Asian and Asian-American communities. *Discourses* is not affiliated with any one cultural group, and welcomes commentary from the entire Yale community regarding the problems involved in the transplantation of culture and the points of intersection between cultures. Although we strive to provide equal representation of as many Asian communities as is possible, it would be far too romantic a gesture to suggest to you (with a straight face) that this, our humble journal, will succeed in representing you. Nevertheless, we feel compelled to make a beginning and to open up a space of discourse on those issues that are important to the vastly diverse communities that fall under the heading of Asian-America.

The traditional methods of discourse, as they are practiced by the various publications on campus, not only avoid or ignore the subject of cultural intersection but are poorly designed to face it. Magazines and journals presently available on campus often privilege an ideology so partisan that their content is reduced to ill-conceived editorializing. *Discourses* would rather not accept admission into the hallowed order of the typical “Yale publication” and wishes instead to challenge its contributors to craft sharp enough arguments to cut through the tangled mass of disposable media. We cannot do this without your insights into the problems that we, varied as we are, must somehow face together. So here we are at last, we’ve gotten this first issue into your hands. If you’re willing to think with some critical intensity, then this small volume is yours. We suspect you’ll give us a go if you’re hard enough. We’re here to think, aren’t we? Let’s begin.

Jaya N. Kasibhatla  
Pearle Lee  
Editors-in-Chief

## Mao Zedong in Nipple Clamps?

by Colin Chow

FETISHISM AND SADOMASOCHISM IN POST-TIAN'ANMEN CHINESE ART

Remember Tian'anmen? Beijing? 1989? Amidst the swirl of hunger strikes and inspirational speeches, art briefly took center stage in the form of the "Goddess of Democracy." Though it looked as if it fell off a high school homecoming parade float, the statue nevertheless transcended its sheer ugliness to shine as a giddy vision of hope for the embattled student protesters. Instead of thinking, "Hey look, those kooky Chinese kids ripped off the Statue of Liberty!" television viewers around the world were deeply moved by the sincerity and passion embodied by the simple plaster statue. Incorporating both the idealism and naiveté of the students, the "Goddess of Democracy" emerged as the first work of art to address directly the concerns and sentiments of the Tian'anmen protesters.

Unfortunately, a thirty-ton armored tank could care less about art or hope or any of that mushy stuff. The Chinese government authorized the use of lethal force to crush the peaceful masses. As the protesters' euphoric dream of democracy dissipated in a haze of gun smoke, Chinese artists came face to face with the alarming possibility that their art afforded meager protection against the juggernaut of *Realpolitik* in Communist China.

In the years since Tian'anmen, the Chinese government has taken pains to avoid any further unrest by cracking down on any type of so-called "revolutionary" activity. In response, many Chinese artists turned inward, invoking an almost fatalistic cynicism in their work. One of the more surprising, subversive sub-groups in this genre of cynical art incorporates themes of fetishism and sadomasochism. In general, these artists manipulate and twist images to convey a sense of emotional bondage – a bitter criticism of the restrictive social conditions in China. According to Chang Tsong-zung, curator of an exhibition of Chinese art in the 1990's, "In their hurt, [the artists] have turned upon others or upon themselves. Instead of transcending their wounds, they have transferred them. As a general social phenomenon the art reflects a society in which people are physically and mentally so closely herded that their repressed drives are forced to find expression in perverted attitudes and behaviours."

This is not to imply that Chinese people are trotting around in leather gear and whipping each other with cat o' nine-tails. Rather, various avant-garde Chinese artists have incorporated alternative interpretations of obsession and sensuality into their work, whether subtly or explicitly. One such artist is Zeng Fanzhi (b. 1964), who uses thick Expressionist brush strokes to create disturbing depictions of doctors and patients. In Zeng's paintings, the expected relationship between healer and healed is transformed into an encounter between molester and molested. The center panel of Zeng's 1991 *Hospital Triptych* [Fig. 1], shows a naked patient lying prone on his stomach, surrounded by physicians whose unfocused eyes hint at insanity. At the center of the painting, a doctor with his sleeve rolled up extends a sinister forefinger, while the doctor to the left shows him exactly where to put that finger. The preoccupation with pain and penetration continues with Zeng's inclusion of sharp, probing objects like the scissors and needle in the bottom left corner of the painting. In addition, the doctor on the right holds a tray

of medical instruments that bear more than a passing resemblance to tools of torture. By casting the painting as an allegory of the Chinese government abusing its people, Zeng reveals his skepticism toward the possibility of human freedom and dignity in his state.

Song Yonghong (b. 1966) also employs themes of sexual torture in his art to illustrate his frustrations with China. He imbues his paintings with such anxiety and inner restlessness that a viewer wants to scream just to break the tension. Some-

Fig. 1  
Hospital Triptych  
oil on canvas  
1991  
180x150cm

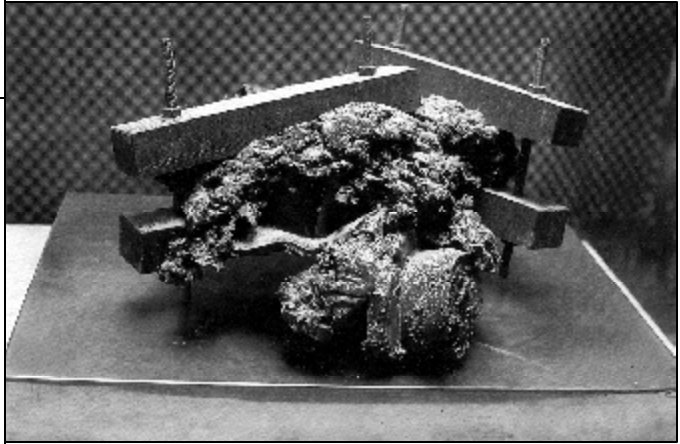




Fig. 2  
Real Illusions  
oil on canvas  
1992  
81x100cm

times, a figure in his painting fulfills that role. For example, in the 1992 *Real Illusions* [Fig. 2], the man at the left twists his own wrist until he bellows in pain. In a way, this self-infliction of pain represents his only release from the suffocating repression of personal freedoms that pervades daily life in China. *Real Illusions* also explores the notion that society itself foments perversion. The central foreground composition of a man and a woman highlights the absurdity of China's insistence on sexual inhibition. The man, crossing his legs and arms, shifts his weight away from the woman as if to deny his sexual desire. Still, he stretches his hand to expose her breast. Meanwhile, the woman demurely folds her hands in her lap, yet spreads her legs wide as a symbol of her own sexual hunger. She also closes her eyes, both in anticipation of pleasure and to free herself from her social responsibility of preventing the man from touching her. The two seem distant strangers who are powerfully connected by mutually unsatisfied lust and forced by society to become

Fig. 3  
Meat Clamps (1)  
Plastic, iron & wood  
1992  
38x50x46cm



voyeur and exhibitionist. Song frames the couple in the background as an intriguing counterpoint to the motif of sexual frustration. Here, the man and woman are close together, probably married. The couple, however, kiss without touching lips, emphasizing the emotional emptiness of their relationship. The man averts his gaze away from the woman in disdain or disgust. By contrasting the two pairs of people, the artist questions whether the relationships sanctioned by society or the state are any healthier than those which the two institutions seek to sweep under the carpet. Meanwhile, at the far right of the painting, a woman covers her face with a pamphlet. Representative of Chinese society, she pretends not to see the depravity and perversion surrounding her. By cutting off half of her body with the edge of the painting, Song suggests that China will never be whole as long as it refuses to acknowledge the individuality, sexual or otherwise, of its people.

Torture and its haunting reality pervades other forms of Chinese art, especially sculpture. Because it is three-dimensional, the sculptural medium can present sadomasochism and fetishism with a visceral immediacy that borders on the repulsive.

Sculptors like Zhang Yongjian (b. 1958) take advantage of this property of sculpture to produce powerfully charged works of art that can wring urgent emotional responses from the viewer. One of his best works is his 1992 *Meat Clamps* (1) [Fig. 3], which utilizes plastic, metal, and wood to construct a terrifying vision of human bondage. Reminiscent of the medieval rack-and-screw, the brackets pin down an anthropomorphic piece of plastic that the artist has heated and pierced with metal bolts. The agonized contortions of the plastic seem to echo the unheard screams of an imaginary victim locked in the vicious embrace of the meat clamps. In a disquieting observation on the cruelty of existence, Zhang parallels the torture that he inflicts on the material object with the actions of a Chinese government that readily oppresses and abuses its powerless subjects.

Ultimately, the phenomena of fetishism and sadomasochism arise as near-necessities in the work of artists so wounded that they can no longer find inspiration in beauty. In Zhang Yongjian's words, "There is nothing more startling than degeneracy and decay, and nothing more able to keep history on the path of evolution; for these transcend time and space." The images may sometimes be shocking, even offensive, but they remain relevant and vital to China's search for a collective self-identity as it stumbles into the twenty-first century.

# Queer in Bharat

*by Charu Chandrasekhar*

## THE EMERGENCE OF THE GAY AND LESBIAN MOVEMENT IN INDIA

Contemporary India has yet to experience a massive sexual revolution on the scale of the cultural upheavals that shook the United States in the 1960s. In many parts of the Subcontinent, traditional Indian mores continue to define cultural and social life. In spite of the continuing dominance of these traditional values, the dynamism within Indian society renders Indian culture far from irrelevant and static. The rise in India over the past decade of new, alternative forms of sexual behavior and expression testifies to the transformation of certain cultural standards. Such transformations do not necessarily replace or subvert traditional mores, but instead broaden existing cultural standards and values to include previously underrepresented and invisible groups.

### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The emergence in India of a formalized gay and lesbian movement constitutes one of the most recent significant transformations within Indian culture. Homosexuality has undoubtedly existed in every era of Indian history, but formal and institutional expressions of homosexuality have emerged in India only

in the past decade. Although the establishment of Western gay and lesbian movements in the 1960s provided an impetus to the formalization of Indian homosexuality, the genesis of the Indian gay and lesbian movement possesses fundamentally Indian roots. The dominant Indian anti-gay sentiment contends that homosexuality is essentially and exclusively a Western phenomenon, yet homosexual behavior and sentiment is present in many of the oldest texts of Indian civilization. Thus, the characterization of homosexuality as a form of “Western decadence” is entirely fallacious. Hindu Sage Vatsyana’s *Kama Sutra*, the world’s first literary classic on sex, contains an entire chapter on homosexual sexual activity. Throughout Indian history, various religious and secular texts have recognized the importance and validity of same-sex love and sexual activity.

#### CULTURAL BARRIERS

As of yet, Indian homosexuality has not enjoyed a visibility commensurate with its existence. Indian cultural convention has often ignored or dismissed the existence of homosexuality. Traditional Indian mores have not incorporated homosexuality into the acceptable modes of social behavior. The hegemony of the cultural belief that the attainment of heterosexual marriage and family life is central to personal, social, and spiritual fulfillment has dismissed homosexuality as antithetical to the foundation of Indian civilization, which (according to this view) necessarily rests upon a heterosexual foundation. Consequently, heterosexual marriage and familial life have enjoyed exclusive status as the sole legitimate avenues of personal and communal fulfillment. The ideological dominance of heterosexuality translates into the expectation of most Indians to lead actively heterosexual existences. The privileging of heterosexuality has limited the options for self-fulfillment of Indian gays and lesbians. Marriage to a heterosexual partner constitutes an option pursued by many gay men and lesbians who do not pursue the

formidable, and often traumatic, path of resistance to marriage with pursuit of same-sex companionship. Involvements in such untenable relationships, however, often ruin the lives of the family members whom the marriage was originally meant to enrich. Many of these married homosexuals often pursue homosexual relationships outside of their heterosexual marriages. The proliferation of the testimonials of unhappy heterosexually-married gay men demonstrate that such Indian gays and lesbians view "marriages of convenience" as the only available option due to the unassailable dominance of the institution of heterosexual marriage.

In particular, lesbians experience a considerable amount of social pressure to conform to these social norms, which contend that heterosexual marriage and childbearing form two necessary components of every woman's life. In addition, mainstream society has traditionally not encouraged those lesbians and gay men who choose not to enter empty heterosexual marriages to pursue satisfying and fulfilling same-sex romantic relationships. Society has traditionally relegated the sexuality and romanticism of the gay individual to the fringes of society. Consequently, male homosexuality has witnessed the emergence of a vast sexual underworld in many of India's urban centers. Although the existence of a socially illegitimate gay male sexual underground hardly constitutes an ideal form of sexual expression, lesbians traditionally have not enjoyed any forms of social expression. Rather, the virtual absence of any lesbian social infrastructure has fostered the rise in India of the pernicious phenomenon of lesbian invisibility.

Homosexual sexual activity is a particularly difficult and complicated issue: Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code criminalizes sodomy, yet refers to no other forms of same-sex sexual activity. Same-sex marriage does not enjoy status as a legal right nor does it have a place in social debates. The difficulties of lesbian and gay life in India, however alarming, do not attest to a particular oppressiveness of Indian society. Ho-

homosexuality faces persecution in most, if not all, parts of the world. As the oppression that gays and lesbians experience adopts regional and cultural characteristics across different societies, the classification of Indian society as “more hostile” to homosexuality than Western societies, is not a valid or relevant contention.

#### EMERGING VOICES

Over the past decade, however, the invisibility of the Indian lesbian and gay presence has started to dissolve. The early 1990s witnessed the emergence of gay and lesbian social institutions and forms of cultural expression. *Bombay Dost*, India’s first lesbian and gay publication, debuted in 1990; *Pravartak* magazine now serves the Calcutta gay and lesbian community. Gay and lesbian organizations continue to grow in number and prominence: there currently exist gay groups in New Delhi, Calcutta, Cochin, and Secunderabad. Networking with Asian and international lesbian and gay organizations has strengthened the work of these India-based organizations, specifically on the subject of HIV/AIDS.

Publications such as *Bombay Dost* and the presence of such groups have allowed for the discussion of a multiplicity of issues relevant to contemporary Indian gay and lesbian life. Through cultural media, especially film and literature, Indian gay and lesbian life has received attention and a space for expression. The films *Fresh Kill* (1994) and *Adhura* (1995) portray lesbian and gay life with unprecedented honesty. Literary works, ranging from Shani Mootoo’s *Out on Main Street* to R. Raj Rao’s *One Day I Locked My Flat in Soul City*, constitute another avenue for the articulation of perspectives on the gay and lesbian experience. The increasing coverage of lesbian and gay issues by the mainstream media has heightened awareness of the existence in India of homosexuality, and has generated serious debate on the subject across the country.

### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Indian lesbian and gay movement faces formidable challenges. As over seventy percent of the Indian populace inhabits rural areas, the movement's exclusive location in urban areas renders it accessible to only a small fraction of the entire Indian gay and lesbian community. Moreover, such publications as *Bombay Dost* and the outreach efforts of many gay organizations exhibit a bias that excludes illiterate, non-English speaking, and economically disadvantaged populations. The most significant shortcoming of the current Indian lesbian and gay movement may be the absence of a lesbian presence that matches that of gay men. Gay men dominate the bulk of the activity and discussion undertaken by these institutions; there exists comparatively little examination of the experiences of, and the specific challenges faced by, lesbians. Lesbian health remains an understudied topic. Most importantly, Indian society has yet to transform such that the lesbian and gay existence is respected as an acceptable alternative to heterosexuality. Homosexuality still experiences condemnation as a Western anomaly that threatens the sanctity of supposedly traditional values. The movement has yet to maximize its potential or to incorporate the entire Indian lesbian and gay population. The observation that the development of this movement mirrors the past emergence of gay and lesbian movements worldwide, however, demonstrates that the Indian lesbian and gay movement occupies a position to grow in size, significance, and impact in the near future.

## Hisaye Yamamoto and the Politics of Duality

*by Marisa Galvez*

Hisaye Yamamoto's short story, "Seventeen Syllables," is widely recognized as a canonical text by readers and critics of Asian-American literature.<sup>1</sup> It is a subtly lyrical work, in which immigrants negotiate the problem of the bifurcated self. Yamamoto's investment in the political and social aspects of the immigrant experience reflects her own upbringing during the post-World War II era of internment camps and xenophobia. The text places an almost rhythmic insistence on various types of dualities, ranging from the purely dialogic to the overtly political. As the characters strain against the binary oppositions in their lives, the reader comes to appreciate the struggle involved in adding the term "American" to that of "Japanese." Yamamoto attempts to address a vaguely terrifying problem in the creation of consciousness, and her work is clearly relevant to the battles fought in identity politics today.

"Seventeen Syllables" is a story about a nisei<sup>2</sup> family in post-World War II California, narrated from the point of view of Rosie, a young girl. Throughout Rosie's narrative the trope of duality persists. Whenever these dualities (which I will explicate) are challenged, it is through the introduction of a third element (or trio), signifying the existence of multiple realities

1 "Seventeen Syllables" was first published in the November 1949 issue of *Partisan Review*, pp. 1122-34.

2 Nisei are second-generation Japanese-Americans, children of the issei (Japanese immigrants).

and freeing the characters from the bonds of the binary struggle. To represent the complexity of the Asian-American identity within the formal economy of a short story is no small task, but Yamamoto's binaries and trios succeed without resorting to heavy-handed methods.

Though told through Rosie's perspective, the story focuses on her mother, a Japanese haiku poet who lives a double existence of subservient housewife and aspiring artist. The concept of binaries versus trios emerges in the very beginning of the story. Rosie's mother is reading a haiku, a Japanese poem divided into "three lines of five, seven, and five syllables" to her daughter. Rosie, indifferent to her mother's artistry and ashamed of her own scant knowledge of Japanese, responds "Yes, yes, I understand. How utterly lovely." Throughout the story, the repetition of words, "yes, yes" or "no, no," occurs in a moment when a character is trying negotiate the duality of being Asian and American at the same time. The haiku itself is an art form which emphasizes tremendous word economy, and thus puts a remarkable strain on the writer. Yamamoto is asking the reader to consider how the creation of beauty under the strictness of formal constraints, as in the writing of a haiku poem, is akin to the task of being a good wife and a good mother.

The two-versus-three trope extends beyond that of the haiku's depiction of meaning, and figures prominently in relational conflicts of identity. The neighbor's wife, after giving birth to one baby, becomes ill to give birth to "three babies." Rosie, in the excitement of young love, runs to Jesus, "between two patches of tomatoes" and therefore, has a dual relationship with him. Rosie in her hatred for both her mother and father, wishes that the old Ford would crash and she has a vision of "three contorted, bleeding bodies." The trio, or third element, in each of these cases and in the story as a whole, disrupts the simple duality of geographical dislocation present in the combined terms "Asian" and "American," "immigrant" and "generation" as does the multidimensional young Rosie, a first-generation Asian-

American woman. Rosie's couplet's, "no, no" or "yes, yes," are her frustrated responses to the difficult task of negotiating the troubles between her mother and father and the problems revolving around cultural translocation. Her mother uses a Japanese literary tradition to create her new American independence, even though her father despises her artistic identity and uses tradition against her to make her a subservient house wife. But where is Rosie's outlet for expression? Yamamoto creates a dynamic tension of identity that emerges from dualities: Japan/America, mother/father, Jesus/Rosie, Rosie/father into a full picture of a dialectic – the constant negotiation and disruptive difference of the third is exemplified in the character of Rosie.

Yamamoto's approach formally problematizes issues of duality within the discourse of ethnic identity. Yamamoto writes "Seventeen Syllables" within and around the complex figure of the haiku. All haikus have the same structure, "three lines of five, seven, and five syllables" yet the line between the two five-syllable lines works with the two others in negotiation and disruption which, in addition to the meticulous word choice of the seventeen syllables, allows for enormous complexity within the strict structure of the poem. Thus, Yamamoto frames American identity as a constant vacillation between two heritages, which the emerging idiosyncratic "hybrid" disturbs.

At the end of the story, Rosie's mother tells her daughter that she had come to America from Japan to marry her father as an alternative to suicide from a failed illicit Japanese liaison. After her husband symbolically destroys her poetry prize, she pleads with Rosie, "Promise me you will never marry." Rosie responds just as indifferently to her mother's plea as to her haikus, "Yes, yes I promise." Rosie's mother, in frantic torture from her daughter's reaction, with "her eyes and twisted mouth" says, "Oh, you, you you." In her repetition of "you" three times, Rosie's mother realizes that she cannot make her daughter sway simply to her side; her daughter lives in irreducible ambivalence between two countries, cultures and lifestyles. As a *nisei*

writer, a second Japanese-American woman who experienced Japanese internment during the war, Yamamoto writes from the experience of oppression in America. The contribution of ethnic American writers is not homogeneous; to say so is not to give justice to the skill of these people as individual artists. Yet in our society today there is much that may keep these voices from being heard, and little to prevent them from simply being characterized as “other” voices.

## *Kama Sutra: The Stumbling Career of Mira Nair*

by *Jaya N. Kasibhatla*

Voyuerism is an addictive topic for students of contemporary literature and film. Much ink has been spilled analyzing the intentions of filmmakers or authors in framing the encounter between viewer and film (or reader and text) as one in which the viewer “looks in” on the story. Although we’d all like to indulge in the fantasy that gives our role as viewer a name, it seems that not all films and novels handle this framework successfully. In Mira Nair’s *Kama Sutra*, a badly written script and poor direction give the viewer the sense that her role as voyeur encompasses the only experiential involvement required of her. Nair does not take advantage of the thematic richness of her subject matter (the life of a courtesan in ancient India) and therefore, squanders the opportunity to explore a fascinating period in the history of the Indian court.

I do not fault Nair for her graphic depiction of sexual intercourse, rape or the search for physical pleasure, for we are all sexual beings. But as a filmmaker, she should rely on character development and a strong script to convey the gravity of the themes that attend the subject of courtesan culture – such as objectification of the body, patriarchy, homosexuality, love and betrayal. Proof that Nair is actually interested in the subject of

love can be found in the subtitle she chose for the film, "A Tale of Love." Unfortunately, the characters doing the loving are hardly equal in depth and skill. The narrative focuses on four main characters: the queen-to-be (Tara), her servant (Maya), the king, and a sculptor (Jaykumar). The script privileges the male roles by giving them lines that express strikingly intense personalities, beliefs and philosophies. Naveen Andrews (the king) has a fine perception of the dementia that was said to visit Hindu kings who were addicted to their opium and their courtesans. He plays his despicable role rather well, but this is partly because his role is crafted well.

On the other hand, the two female protagonists are practically one-dimensional characters. The relationship between Maya and Tara is mainly one of jealousy and competition. On the day of Tara's wedding, Tara catches Maya and her bridegroom (the king) exchanging suggestive glances. Alarmed and outraged, Tara spits in Maya's face before the entire marriage party. Maya then retaliates by sleeping with the king on the night of the royal wedding. Because Maya has envied Tara's regal status since childhood, her sexual encounter with the king seems an attempt to gain royal status for herself, in addition to being a simple act of revenge. But why does Maya choose sexual possession as her particular method of retaliation? One could argue that her upbringing, during which she was introduced to the *Kama Sutra*, taught her that sex was a powerful tool and even a weapon. At this stage however, she is still a novice in its arts. Therefore, the outcome of this first sexual conquest is to establish Maya as a sexual artist of exceptionally high caliber. There is little in the film however, to suggest that she is anything *but* a sexual manipulator. At least for Tara, the audience feels sympathy since her husband is obsessed with Maya and ignores her almost entirely. But Maya herself has no depth, she wanders through the story, stopping periodically to practice the sexual techniques she learned from her teacher, played by Rekha. I was stunned to see Rekha, who acted in perhaps the most

brilliantly subtle and beautiful film about prostitution, *Umrao Jaan*, play such a badly written role. One of Rekha's observations, in particular, exemplifies the shallow and problematic nature of the dialogue spoken by female characters in the film. When she is teaching her students the methods of enticement found in the *Kama Sutra*, she remarks: "there is a bit of the courtesan in every woman." Nair could, in theory, be satirizing or challenging this belief, but since she casts Rekha's character as that of the wise matron whom every girl trusts, it is highly unlikely. Thus, the idea that there is a "bit of the whore" in every woman suggests to us that feminism is a new concept to Mira Nair.

Such pitfalls in dialogue, where there is potential for a powerful point to be made, appear throughout the film. The audience was laughing at what were meant to be tender moments, and nothing in this film could be taken seriously as soon as the first sari tumbled to the ground. Nair has made one improvement however – every one of her films, from *Salaam Bombay* to *Mississippi Masala*, indulges in stereotypes of the Indian male as the prototypical devil, but in *Kama Sutra* the artisan who falls in love with Maya is a strong and intelligent Indian man. Because of its inability to create intense characters, the film is essentially a peep-show, where the audience encounters the dialogue as an "interval" between sex scenes. It is not the subject matter, but an inadequate amount of artistic sensitivity and intelligence, that leaves the viewer feeling disturbed.

Upon viewing this film, a kind of dissociative disorder, which I suggest results mainly from poor dialogue, took effect on me quite immediately. I felt as if I were watching a movie about an alien culture, a culture entirely different from my own. I do not mean this in the sense that the story was set in ancient times, but in the sense that it was unable to assert its place in Indian history with convincing effect. This is unfortunate, because her portrayal of the king and his court was quite accurate. Many Hindu kings became slaves to opium and their sexual appe-

tites, and lost their kingdoms. If the characters had any depth or meaningful lines, the full social and cultural implications of the court setting could have been explored. The disparity between the quality of female and male roles in dialogue undoes what could otherwise have been an intriguing portrait of the life of a courtesan. Ultimately, I believe it is an honorable thing to press one's people onwards to self-evaluation and revolution, but it requires an intellect that can pierce through more than sweaty flesh.

## Who taught Nanna to gamble?

*by Willoughby Mariano*

“We can think of each other like lions,” young Nanna mumbled and yawned, and with the dark sound of passing yarn on the wood floor, Nanna was once more dreaming while standing. That afternoon, she had been standing outside the empty kitchen, imagining the country. By noontime, the gray soot from the damp fires outside had become so thick that to keep its taste out of the living room, she had to stuff the gaps of the window frames with rags. The fires burned constantly now, not only at night, because the fire department had become too poor to put gasoline in its trucks. These fires gutted the bulky charred carcasses at which Nanna knew her husband could only blink and call “old buildings.” In the yellow mirror she was wiping, an old man was urinating onto the January sidewalk, but that afternoon, Nanna was riding a golden horse through smooth shorn heath.

Then the padded feet of the cat crossed behind her, and with that instant she spoke into a cruel, dreaming fit that told her she was scraping filth from the bottom of cages at the zoo.

“What did you say?” Nanna’s husband was padding heavily towards the kitchen, putting a folded newspaper into his back pocket. Anthony blinked at Nanna with the weight of large,

dull eyes which she once imagined were those of an ox. "What did you say?"

"That cat," Nanna said, remembering why she hated slow animals, "that cat made me dream again. We should get rid of it. I hear the pawing on the floor and want to fall asleep."

"That's nonsense," he said. "No one can hear the sound of a cat walking."

"You are deaf," she said. "That cat is magic."

"We will see the doctor again." Anthony felt her hot forehead and decided that he could only stroke Nanna's brittle hand until she fell asleep. He could never believe that cat was magical. "I know cats," he said. "I work at the zoo," and he smiled to reassure Nanna before she fell into the fitful dream his quiet certainty thought would be inevitable.

"You know there is no more zoo," Nanna said, and she stood to look for her coat.

The cat had arrived last month, in December, when the people from the bank came to take the living room furniture away. That afternoon, it entered through the same door out of which the furniture was leaving. It sat its warm girl body on a pile of soot and rags in the corner, just next to where Anthony had always imagined Nanna would stay while he was working at the zoo. She would be sitting in front of the television, or sometimes she would be reading a magazine, and when he returned from work, she would try to talk about movie stars by using only their first names. He would laugh at his Nanna and smile, a response which would make her ruffle, worried. "Do you think that I'm silly?" she asked would ask. "Do you think I should work?"

"You should never work," he would say, and kiss her on the forehead, "but you should always stay here, sweet Nanna," and Anthony smiled, reasoning that Nanna did stay. She even stayed while the furniture was leaving, sitting on the floor stroking the cat's back. "What luxurious fur," she said, pulling it through

her cracking winter hands. And as her living room emptied into the back of the moving truck, Anthony watched her tiny black eyes fix on the dry-tongued preening of the yellow cat. In the next hour she fell delirious with a high and violent fever. Anthony watched her shallow breathing, "she's a mouse," he thought, and with that thought felt as if he had kissed her on the forehead.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Why, it's no trouble at all. Dream of eating ice cream," Anthony whispered, and called for a cab to the emergency room. He paid the medical bill with the dining room furniture, but the week afterwards, when the men from the bank came to claim it, Nanna pounced raging from her bedroom with a shriek so violent that she tore the thin-skinned sickness that had made her even smaller and more of a mouse than she had ever been, and she, wild Nanna, flung her raging mouse arms forward, striking one of the movers about his skull and biting his skin until his ears bled onto her nightgown. Anthony pawned their two pieces of hallway furniture to pay for her bail.

"They forgot to take the mirror," Nanna said when they returned from the police station. It was at that instant that Anthony was pulled by the urge to kiss Nanna's soft December fingers, and confess that the city had run out of all its money in October, that the zoo had been closed since then, and that they, too, had no more money. So he did, but Nanna only rolled her eyes. "I am sick and cannot hear you," she was looking for a place to sit down, but there was only the pile of rags left.

"You are young, sweet Nanna, you are still only 17," Anthony was sighing, but then she glared at him with a bitter girlish rage, and he remembered that he was 32 years old.

"But just wait," he said, still holding her fingers. "Please wait, you don't understand. You have just barely been married," but her thin mouse skull was already thumping against the wood floor in the first bout of sickness from which she would later wake and call "fitful dreaming."

Where is Nanna walking? Anthony was not yet worried. That January afternoon, she had pulled the front door shut just as he discovered that she hid his house keys in her bureau, but somehow he was not yet worried. He could not imagine where she would be going, but his reason told him that she could no longer walk to the Casino: its guards had discovered last November that she was counting cards. "Anthony, my Anthony, zoo veterinarian, older and wiser than a octogenarian." Nanna had returned from her adventure and laughed, moving through the bedroom with the soft walk Anthony had insisted seduced him from between the bird house to the lion cages.

April, he saw her that morning as he was beneath the spigot in the lion cage, washing the smell of animal blood from his hands. "What a girl she is," he thought to himself, and began to look away. But Nanna walked to him and spoke plainly. "I am wondering about the lion and the lioness," she said, pointing upwards. "Why do you put them into them in separate cages?"

"Because last night, they were fighting," he said.

"Would they eat each other, if they were together?"

"Yes, they would."

"So you're a lion tamer, then." She smiled.

It was May before he told her that she liked the way she smiled when she walked. "I never smile," she responded, in all innocence. "It's just this zoo haze that makes you think I do." Anthony was laughing without knowing he was nervous.

May, and Nanna became 17. They drove four hours to the next state and got married, delirious until they found themselves standing on the wood floor of his living room. "Wait until we get home," he had said in the car, "you're so impatient."

"Young, young," she said. "I can add. 32 is not 17. I love you." Home, and they found themselves staring at each other from opposite ends of the living room, two mute animals.

November, and Nanna had returned from the Casino so she could put her brush down and play with Anthony's hair. "I assure you, I was at the supermarket." Nanna laughed in a young way which confused Anthony, but this time he was struck with the dim thought that this laugh meant something he could not know to call disdain.

He had followed Nanna earlier that night across the train tracks to the Casino, and though he would blink through the lights and the ringing sounds, he knew how she could watch the cards shuffle through in the dealers hands, and how she would throw up her thin arms at the high-stakes tables, "Royal Flush!" But he did not imagine that she could feel him watch her through her back. "Old Anthony," Nanna would say if she could see him, Anthony thought.

This time he frowned. To punish her, he pulled a shoe box of hundred dollar bills out from underneath their bed. "That's just change," Nanna laughed and pulled it from his hands. "Look, I bought you a coat," and she turned away from him to lift a heavy yellow fur from her shopping bag.

"Nanna, sweet Nanna, you are always so bright," Anthony was confused and did not resist her. "But I don't think this is safe."

"Nanna the Gambler. Anthony, Tamer of Lions, Zoo Veterinarian. You want to know where I really was?" Nanna laughed again and Anthony became angry. "Nanna, bored young housewife, secret seductress. I was sleeping with your boss. That's where I got the money."

"Don't be stupid, Nanna," Anthony said, but then stopped short. Instead of continuing, ("I don't have a boss anymore") his eyes fixed on Nanna as she sat her girl body onto the pile of blankets on their bed, combing her girl's yellow hair. "Who taught you to gamble?" he forgot to ask, and Anthony, who could not imagine how it would feel to pull one's hands through one's own long hair, was hypnotized. Then Nanna undressed.

By the time Anthony had shut the front door, sweet Nanna was already one block ahead of him. "We should get rid of the cat, I said," she shouted without looking backwards. "It bores me. I am bored. I'm bored eight months," she said.

It was late, and the sky was burnt with wet winter smoke that Anthony could taste like bitter ashes in his mouth. Even falling snow was ashes. Anthony kept his quiet pace, one careful block behind the gray mouse coat which made the outline of her tiny body disappear into the ash-snow. He could only know she was still walking before him by the sound of her voice. "Bird Street, Bear," she called out, passing Main Street. "Horse Street. Lion Avenue. Tiger." She passed the charred and gutted carcass of a building still burning.

"Please Nanna, you're sick." He shouted back. She was climbing over the clutter of broken turnstiles at the zoo.

"When you would go away to work, I followed you," Nanna said sullen through the empty bars of the cage. Nanna saw two brooding lions with ragged fur, heaped on their tired haunches. A lion and a lioness in cages, who would stare into each other's eyes across the walkway.

"You must understand. I'm worried," Anthony called out, still behind her. She moved around the circumference of the cage with that same slow walk that he imagined had seduced him. As she could expect, her walking made him nervous, and he stopped following her when he reached the edge of the walkway.

"I understand," she said. "You taste ash in your mouth."

But she no longer had to pay Anthony any mind. The lions were talking to Nanna.

"You can think of each other as we do," they said.

"Can I?" she asked. She walked halfway around the cage's circumference, and stopped where she could clearly see Anthony standing across from her. "I have taught the lions to talk, Anthony."

"What do they say?" He asked from across the walkway.

She sighed a wet, bitter sigh from her gray lips and felt as if the sigh was blood.

“They tell me to gamble.”

His eyes squinted to see her between the bars, and blinked at her with eyes that with tacit, literal sorrow that could never tell they would never know Nanna. “Please Nanna, sweet Nanna, you’ve gone insane,” he cried.

“You know that the only sickness you ever understood is the sickness of animals,” she said. And with those words, young, sweet Nanna died.

EUN JOO

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silver gelatine prints  
*6 inches by 9 inches*







PREM KRISHNAMURTHY

UNTITLED

silver gelatine print  
*8 inches by 10 inches*



PREM KRISHNAMURTHY

UNTITLED

silver gelatine print  
11 *inches by* 14 *inches*







