

Stories with horns and tails

EPD: Society and Space

2026, Vol. 44(1) 151–157

© The Author(s) 2025



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/02637758251398688

journals.sagepub.com/home/epd



Sneha Krishnan 

Abstract

This paper traces how femme circulates in (post)colonial geographies of interiority, to mark loci of excess: places where the archive oozes, failing containment. Drawing on ethnography, historical research, ghost stories, personal experience, and family memory, this essay thinks across geographies of homemaking and girlhood to locate femme in the affects of clinging, desperation, refusal: attachments to futures that have to be left behind for the making of colonial modernity. Femme, I argue, undermines caste-colonial-nationalist formations of authority in its stubbornness, in its insistence on the excessive stories of unreliable narrators.

Keywords

Femme, colonialism, ghosts, girlhood, caste

On a Spring night in 2007, a Doberman mauled a young woman nearly to death on the campus of a Women's College in the South Indian city of Chennai. No press reported on it, and no one took photographs that I know of. No one wrote about it on a personal blog or on social media – there was barely any at the time. The dog in question belonged to the College. It was one of many guard animals the institution maintained ostensibly to protect the campus from intruders. But they perform another, gristlier, function: they keep the girls in after curfew.

But I can tell you it happened, because I was there. I didn't see the mauling, but I was an undergraduate in the College at the time, and I saw the victim only hours before: she was at the college's annual play in the Music Academy Theatre. In the weeks after the incident, two of my friends started a petition to hold our college accountable that I remember signing. It was not online, where records might linger, but on a piece of paper no one can find anymore. Did someone intentionally destroy it? You didn't have to go that far – teenagers that institutions threaten with expulsion for their anger at the violence of 'protection' don't always keep archives. But both petitioners still remember the mauling in granular detail. They know they circulated a statement against it. They know many of us signed it.

By the time I returned to Chennai in 2012 to begin my research no one was sure if the story was true. Without the scaffolding of documentation to hold it up, the mauling had seeped into the ecosystem of magical and possibly apocryphal tales that haunt institutions of women's education across the British colonial world: suicides, crimes of passion, girls gone mad, starved, locked up, and dead. There are madwomen in every college's attic – or do I mean archive? So, like the young women who told me other extraordinary stories, all I can do is tell this story as I know it. And I am attached to its truth, to the collective wound that means all I have to say is I'm writing about the dog' to a classmate I run into

School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, Brasenose College, Oxford, UK

Corresponding author:

Sneha Krishnan, School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, Brasenose College, Radcliffe Square, Oxford OX14AJ, UK.

Email: Sneha.krishnan@ouce.ox.ac.uk

at a conference nearly 20 years later and she knows what I am talking about. It is a femme history – visceral, laden with desires without futurity, disordering time in its scattered telling, failing to grasp for archival footing.

Femme histories register queer attachments that do not fit within the temporising narratives of nation and empire. *Queer* indexes here not only the desires iterated as lesbian within an LGBT paradigm, but modes of bodied being that dissent from gender's location within imperialism's progressive temporality (Patel, 2000). It registers what falls outside the march forward, at a moment when the elastic band of imperial inclusion paints itself in pride colours, provided the gays in question are middle-class, risk-avoidant consumer citizens (Oswin, 2014). Life and sexual subjectivity beyond this pale coheres in monster-terrorist-fags, jihadi-brides, suicidal dykes and other archetypes that fail the test of self-preserving subjecthood bound into a logic of settler-capitalist inevitability (Krishnan, 2019; Rai, 2004). When we refuse the temporal-territorial bind of imperial inclusion, sensemakers of the genocidal normal also fantasise that we would be 'the first people beheaded and [our] heads played with like a soccer ball' (Hailu, 2023) by the hordes they claim to massacre in the name of women and queers. The violence of protection is, everywhere, a mauling.

In India, caste bridges the aspiration for imperial inclusion, folding savarna citizen-subjects – together with the geopolitical project of an Indian nation-state oriented towards development and marketisation, away from mid-century Third World solidarities – into the march of imperial time. Femme histories cohere in hanging on stubbornly to a story even as the concatenation of home-woman-nation that underlies the endurance of imperial logics in intimate life in the postcolony closes in on refusing its reality. In this register, femme is the locus for the 'stories with horns and tails' that girls are apt to tell, as the Dean of another hostel put it when I met her in 2012 to ask about the stories of death, violence, and disappearance that circulated at her institution. She then continued, gesturing to the young women around us, 'Don't believe them'.

Girl and femme resonate with each other because girlhood – with one foot still in the imaginative world of childhood – allows for access to excess otherwise objected from respectable womanhood. A lot of what you do when you're a girl doesn't *really* count: it doesn't register as an exit ramp in the march of time towards normative cis-heterosexual, or – I'm looking at the Desis wearing caste-marriage-necklaces at their gay weddings in the Global North – homonormative womanhood unless it is as dire as the cautionary violence of a mauling, or something more permanent like a suicide. Such spectacular stories – mostly without trace, or documentary evidence – ricochet around the hard architecture of the hostel (Burton, 2003).

Excessive histories

Femme is embarrassing excess. It is texting with the butch you met at the play, and missing the curfew, so you run in long after the others and risk getting attacked on the way because the good girls are already behind closed doors. I heard this story whispered in various forms in the days that followed the mauling: it circulated alongside the rumour of facial reconstruction surgery, so much of her had the Doberman taken. Notably, it came up when my friends' petition met the wall of institutional refusal: the girl knew, the Vice-Principal told them, that there would be guard dogs. Why did she risk it? Femme histories collect traces of misoriented attachment. In a femme register, history also resonates across embodied experiences, charting a countertopography of imperial violence and refusal (Katz, 2001). In July 2024, Israel's occupation forces set a dog on Mohammed Bhar, an autistic Palestinian in Gaza, whom the attack animal mauled to death (Hussaini, 2024). Years before I was an undergrad, growing up in the South Indian town of Cuddalore that slowly filled with Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka in the late 1980s and 1990s, I learned to fear dogs from the haunting that filled our town, of children chewed to death across the water. The story became a bogeyman – eat your vegetables or the dogs will get you: the banality of a nearby genocide.

The violence of the dog mauling is a kind of residue – a mark of the endurance of empire in the place of modernisation: the women’s college. When Eleanor McDougall went to India in 1915 to become Women’s Christian College’s first principal in erstwhile Madras (now Chennai), she was shocked by what she thought was an entirely unsuitable city for the education of girls (Krishnan, 2017). Nature, she worried, was poorly disciplined in India, and Madras seemed to her an unruly chaotic town, not quite a metropolis. McDougall eventually rented what she called ‘a harem’ – the landlord was Muslim, and across a vast landscape from Turkey to Burma, phantasies of the seraglio housed colonial constructed of hypersexual girls in the tropics apt to mature too quickly, liable to have sex with improper men and with each other (Tambe, 2011). While the College settled into its daily rhythms, the building’s histories and the wildness of the monsoon wind that blew into it continued to haunt an anxious McDougall, who worried that it would never really become the oasis of modernity she wanted.

And so, McDougall appealed to the Rockefeller Foundation to find the funds to buy Doveton House, a purpose-built English East India company house with a tall wall and tidy garden around it (McDougall, 1925). In this new home, she hoped moral infirmity of Indian women – ‘lamps in the wind’ – might find a place to mature (McDougall, 1940). Years later, in 2013, the girls in the hostel tell me that Doveton House too is haunted. Long before McDougall bought it, they say that Edward Clive – son of the more famous Robert, whose statue in London calls him ‘Clive of India’ – killed his biracial mistress there. Clive almost certainly had a relationship with an Indian woman but there is no evidence that he killed her, or that she lived in Doveton (Ghosh, 2006). This absence of documents does not deter those who tell the story. People in power, they tell me, can make the documents say what they want them to. And knowing as I do about the dog in the hostel, I cannot rise above conspiracy theory to be the Oxford-educated voice of reason that might tell them otherwise.

This femme history of Doveton bleeds through the hard architecture of the hostel, against a voluminous official archive of modern girl-making. Its truth value is untestable but matters little – what counts is that this story allows for the holding of real experiences of loss and violence that cannot otherwise be told. In this, history in a femme register is told in a wilful mode (Ahmed, 2014) that refuses the sensible order of nation and empire alike. Wilfulness subverts the linear temporality of modernity and of maturation, and allows for pause on excessive affects, incredible tales, and inconvenient figures. In the civilisational metaphor of childhood, femmes are thus also bad adults: retaining one foot in a juvenile world of pathologically embarrassing sexual desire and political fantasy, failing to properly grow up. Femme histories register intimate refusals that nevertheless ricochet – unsettling not only the precarious concatenation of home-nation-woman that caste and colonial modernity centre on but refusing the sane logics of nation and empire altogether.

McDougall’s anxieties find resonance in the pulp literature of the early twentieth century. In Rumer Godden’s 1939 novel, ‘Black Narcissus’ (2013), the incessant wind and rain of the lower Himalayas prevents a group of nuns from establishing a convent in the hills, particularly as they seek to convert a former harem – a den of Oriental iniquity – into a modern and rational centre for education. They fail, and in the 1947 film version, Kathleen Byron as Sister Ruth puts on red lipstick, her eyes aglow with sexual incontinence. The silent maid, Kanchi – Jean Simmons in brownface – has already seduced Sabu from his future as a brown gentleman. Femme histories tell stories that lead into futures that imperial logics may call dead-end pipe dreams. To this end, they allow for witness from ghosts, and unreliable narrators of fleshly excess.

Unreliable narrators

One of the last conversations I had with my grandmother – Viji, as her family called her – was the time she told me about her cousin, Parvati.¹ I asked if I could record her, and she agreed but would not show

her face in the video we made. So, the camera focuses on Viji's hands in her lap, her tense fingers resting in, and playing with the fabric of her Sari. Viji remembers being about five, sometime in the early 1940s, when she first registered Parvati's presence. She was stick-thin, Viji tells me, and probably no more than 17. All she knew was that Amamma – both girls' grandmother, Narayanikutty, who had a family reputation for severity – had told her Parvati was dangerous. Parvati lived in a locked bedroom in Narayanikutty's home near Calicut on India's West Coast. When Viji visited, she and her siblings would inch near Parvati's room, only to run away screaming as their noses touched the door. Sometimes, Viji remembers, Parvati peered at the children through the barred window that looked out onto the veranda. In those moments, she did not seem frightening – just sad.

Then, one day, the woman behind the window disappeared and no one spoke of Parvati again. When Viji asked about her, Amamma changed the subject. Parvati, Viji tightly rolls some of her sari around her finger, had starved to death. She had been locked in a room in Narayanikutty's house because she fell in love with a young labourer, whom she had met on the way down to school. Viji thinks he may have been 'untouchable' – Dalit – or even if not, he was uneducated and a match that would have upset her parents' social ambitions. And so, they had locked her in a room in Narayanikutty's home and told her she would be released if she promised to give her boyfriend up. Did the family – we – cause him any harm, I ask. Viji is silent, she shakes her head. She doesn't know. They might have done. I think of the Dalit men that upper-caste families have lynched for the crime of loving their daughters – mostly in Tamil Nadu, but Kerala is not as progressive as it imagines itself (Krishnan, 2023; Srinivasan, 2016).

Eventually, Parvati stopped eating. She told Amamma that if they insisted on locking her away, she would die in captivity. The family did not believe that Parvati would go that far – but she did. She chose to waste away as they watched. Viji is now bent over, her voice small. You cannot see this story as the truth, she tells me. It is only what I say, and I am shaming them – us – by telling it. Viji remembered Parvati in an unstoppable flood, when I told her about the hostel stories I was writing. Her story had found a system of representation that could give it meaning, allowing her to tell it, even if shrouded in shame. In their excess – Viji asks me, near the end, if it is better to starve to death than to just suck it up, be a good girl and survive – such narratives iterate geographies of refusal that unsettle a biopolitical bargain where abandonment to death is the punishment. Homes and hostels – the carceral dwellings where femme affect and gender subversion are held, disciplined, their desires reoriented again towards respectable national womanhood – rewrite themselves as containers of affects without futurity (Krishnan, 2023).

Viji's family took pride in its proper modernity: its faith in a Nehruvian India, and in Molly, my fierce mother, who became a doctor. But Molly was starved too, this time because she wasn't high caste enough for my father's Brahmin family. And with her, I – dark like an over-baked biscuit, as Viji joked – subsisted on half a stomach's dinner and plotted my escape. But we didn't talk about it, because being upwardly mobile in India is to transcend the bodied, sexualised humiliation of caste (Krishnan, 2023; Subramanian, 2015). At that story's excess was Parvati, whose history marks the violent limit of 'we don't do caste', the telling of which is so weighted with complicity, Viji cannot show her face.

Viji died early in 2024, a happy death in old age. Months later, Molly asks me if I too felt that maybe we could be less good now. I see myself teenaged, faking food poisoning to skive off the school trip because I had been assigned to room with J: stone butch, prone to giving me looks from the top of the stairs, stirring in me an excess I now call femme. I knew I'd be a dyke – maybe a dead one (Patel, 2004) – if I went. I look up at Molly, whose violent resentment of me has mellowed over the years since she first let go of being the spitfire socialist with tricontinental dreams that her classmates recall. 'Is that something real to want?' Viji's refrain, silently reiterating Parvati's death as the cautionary tale that whipped us in line: good girls with nice jobs, proud of our TVs, unlikely to chase disruptive political fantasies.

Now, amidst mourning and giggles, I decide to write about Parvati, whose story calls into being a femme register that also means remembering other figures banished into biopolitical abandonment. This jouissance is as Amber Jamilla Musser (2018) writes ‘a project of recovery and survival’. This is not the ‘hydraulic’ archival recovery of looking for historical proof within a colonial episteme (Stoler and Strassler, 2000), but rather of poesis: a contingent and collective recovery of attachments and desires that are otherwise abandoned. It is wilful refusal that undoes the neatening exercise that keeps family, nation, and caste-empire in a tidy line. A femme history entails reorientation towards affects now dissonant with the cadence of liberal-capitalism’s marching band: towards liberation that those with sense might deem impossible (Drift and Raha, 2024).

Conclusion

“No”, said the dyke, “I’m not a man. How can an unreal person feel a real thing?”

-Suniti Namjoshi, *The Wicked Witch* (1981: 40)

Femme histories diagram the interior places that mediate between discourse and materiality in the rearticulation of home as a locus for feminist politics (Burton, 2003). In this, they restage interiority outside its Victorian paradigm of silent reading, self-contained responsibility, and within the political collectives that allow for the re-telling and remembering of histories otherwise erased. Interiority, in its femme register is the stubbornness that makes the space for futurities that cannot be folded within racial capitalist fantasies of inclusion. Hauntings enable the practice of femme history as figures of unhomey citation: the story as it is told displaces both the narrator, and the story that is being told, bringing into materiality and embodiment affects that are otherwise excised from the modern self enroute to adulthood.

In this, femme – in the brown-girl-centred anticolonial reading that this paper brings to it – is queer but not contained within LGBT paradigms. It is extra in hanging on to the promise of liberation and refusing to settle for much else. And indeed, madwomen have been put into attics for less. Nearly two hundred years before the dog mauling, Eliza Raine was born in what was then Madras – now Chennai – of one of the many interracial relationships of this period. She was shuttled off to a school in Yorkshire, and eventually sent off to an asylum (Roulston, 2022). She had turned down too many respectable suitors – men who chose her despite the swarth that gave her parentage away – and clung to her love for the swashbuckling dyke she had begun a relationship with at school. Her lover, Anne Lister is now BBC-famous as Gentleman Jack; Raine does not appear in the televised retelling. If she did, Lister’s cops-at-pride style Conservatism might speak too loud for comfort.


In this, femme histories make no claims to a pure politics but rather accrue to them – without guarantees (Hall, 2016) – the traces that allow us to recast time, from pasts that acknowledge both erased violence and resistance, towards possible – but never promised – revolutionary futures (Drift and Raha, 2024; Patel, 2000). Femme histories, that is, do not reiterate the women’s hostel in its colonial role as a carceral container for girls who carry dangerous excess. Instead, in listening to ghosts and in untellable family histories, it is its own uncanny double: a place of holding, for excessive feelings, and for radical friendship and community.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for two decades of conversations that have shaped this paper, including with Anusha Hariharan, V Geetha, Salai Selvam, Jack Giesecking, Madhuri Shekar, Vijayalakshmi Menon, Ankita Pandey, Charlie Jeffries, and Omar Shweiki. I’m grateful to the Sexual Dissidence centre at the University of Sussex, to the Queer Ecologies workshop at St Andrews that helped me think through this. I’m grateful to Amy Key and Jenn

Ashworth, who taught a writing workshop where I found my desire to write again in 2025. In my head, I've also been talking to Joan Nestle and June Jordan while writing this. Thanks to Moon Charania for including me in this collection, and to the anonymous reviewers of this essay for their close reading. All error and confusion is mine.

ORCID iD

Sneha Krishnan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3351-0715>

Ethical approval and informed consents

Obtained in 2012–2013 from the University of Oxford when interviews were conducted.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This project was supported by a British Academy – Wolfson Foundation Fellowship.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. Name changed as agreed with my grandmother.

References

- Ahmed S (2014) *Willful Subjects*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Burton AM (2003) *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*. New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Drift MVD and Raha N (2024) “They Would Plant the Rose Garden Themselves” femme, complicity, solidarity, and the rewiring of the sensuous. *Social Text* 42(3): 75–100.
- Ghosh D (2006) *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: the Making of Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Godden R (2013) *Black Narcissus: A Virago Modern Classic*. London: Hachette - Little Brown.
- Hailu S (2023) Julianna margulies apologizes for comments accusing black and LGBTQ people of antisemitism: ‘I am horrified’ i offended ‘communities i truly love’.
- Hall S (2016) Culture, resistance, and struggle. In: Slack JD and Grossberg L (eds) *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 180–206.
- Hussaini M (2024) Gaza: Palestinian with down syndrome ‘left to die’ by Israeli soldiers after combat dog attack. Middle East Eye. Middle East Eye. Accessed 18th July. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/gaza-palestinian-down-syndrome-left-die-israeli-soldiers-after-combat-dog-attack>.
- Katz C (2001) On the grounds of globalization: A topography for feminist political engagement. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26(4): 1213–1234.
- Krishnan S (2017) Anxious notes on college life: The gossipy journals of Eleanor McDougall. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 27(4): 575–589.
- Krishnan S (2019) Killing us slowly: Pre-empting suicide at a women’s hostel in Chennai. *Antipode* 51(5): 1515–1533.
- Krishnan S (2023) Carceral domesticities and the geopolitics of Love Jihad. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 41(6): 995–1012.
- McDougall E (1925) *Women’s Christian College, Madras 1915–1925*. edited by Women’s Christian College. Chennai [Madras]: Madras Diocesan Press.

- McDougall E (1940) *Lamps in the Wind: South Indian College Women and their Problems*. London: Edinburgh House Press.
- Musser AJ (2018) *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance*. New York: New York University Press.
- Namjoshi S (1981) The wicked witch. In: *Feminist Fables*. London: Virago, 40–41.
- Oswin N (2014) Queer time in global city Singapore: Neoliberal futures and the ‘freedom to love’. *Sexualities* 17(4): 412–433.
- Patel G (2000) Ghostly appearances: Time tales tallied up. *Social Text* 18(3): 47–66.
- Patel G (2004) Homely housewives run amok: Lesbians in marital fixes. *Public Culture* 16(1): 131–157.
- Rai AS (2004) Of monsters. *Cultural Studies* 18(4): 538–570.
- Roulston C (2022) Interpreting the thin archive: Anne Lister, Eliza Raine, and telling school tales. *Eighteenth-century Studies* 55(2): 191–213.
- Srinivasan P (2016) Title. Chicago Tamil Forum, University of Chicago.
- Stoler AL and Strassler K (2000) Castings for the colonial: Memory work in ‘New Order’Java. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42(01): 4–48.
- Subramanian A (2015) Making merit: The Indian Institutes of Technology and the social life of caste. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57(02): 291–322.
- Tambe A (2011) Climate, race science and the age of consent in the league of nations. *Theory, Culture & Society* 28(2): 109–130.

Author biography

Sneha Krishnan is Associate Professor of Human Geography at the University of Oxford and a British Academy Wolfson Fellow. She serves as an Editor for *Gender, Place and Culture*. Her research explores how geographies of caste and colonialism shape experiences of girlhood. Sneha’s early work examined pleasure and danger in contemporary Chennai, published in journals such as *Antipode* and *Social and Cultural Geography*. Her current project, *Unhomely Histories*, investigates how young Indian women reimagined domesticity in educational institutions during the early twentieth century, challenging conventional narratives of home, woman, and nation. She has also written for wider readerships in *Verso*, *Public Books*, and *History Workshop*.