

[Virtual roundtable on mapping gendered violence] Can we know no? Reflections on domestic violence in the transit lounge of Mishti Gals

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Can we Know No?

Reflections on Domestic Violence in the Transit Lounge of *Mishti Gals*

Raminder Kaur

in forthcoming *Frontiers* virtual roundtable

What is it about relationships in which love and care continues to act as emotional adhesive despite the eruption of violence? What other positions exist apart from the more familiar victim-perpetrator, abused-abuser binaries, which more often than not uniformly contract the reality of many situations involving domestic aggression? What does it mean when an abusive relationship reveals a person who is far from subordinated by it, but may indeed inflect it with his/her own personal stamp? It is precisely such questions that influenced me in my writing of a drama in 2016 on the relationships of Asian women based in East London in 'Brexit Britain' that I elaborate below.¹ Fictionalising the issues allowed me to not only reflect on social realities that extend well beyond Asian communities, but also to appreciate the complexities of individual characters without compromising anyone's real-life identity on a sensitive matter such as domestic abuse. My focus here is on heterosexual women who are statistically most affected by intimate partner violence, whether they be married, cohabiting or just involved in a romantic relationship.²

Knowing No

Feminist persuasions that 'no means no' in the face of sexual assault and violence goes without question. And they have indeed empowered many to assert their rights in the face of (threats of) bodily violation including influencing changes in rape legislation. But in several cases of national jurisdiction, marital rape, as one expression of intimate partner violence, is viewed as a contradiction in terms: rape in marriage is not even recognised as an affront, let alone outlawed as domestic abuse or sexual violence.³ When women are viewed as property, no cannot mean no. Similarly, in more conventional contexts, sexual violence is not recognised as a major issue among relationships where patriarchal heteronormativity dictates that the female be at the beck and call of male volition even if this borders on

physical violation. In her book, *The Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social* (2015), Patricia Owens notes a convergence with the *domestic* and *domination*, both having their roots in the Latin *domus*. Seeing women as predominantly tied to a home exercises a power over them that entrenches the patriarchal family, a form of household governance that might even be described as benign despotism. Violence in the physical or sexual sense becomes the more visible aspect of violence that is inherent in the very basis of domestic convention.

Amongst the British Asian diaspora, the focus of this short contribution, the situation is even more complex. While in Britain, for instance, all forms of rape are officially outlawed, several other countries have not yet criminalised marital rape. These include India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. In comparison, Pakistan and Nepal are two South Asian countries where spousal rape is a criminal offence. These varying legislative, cultural and regional contexts to which South Asian diasporic people owe wavering degrees of allegiance have a bearing on what might be socially sanctioned. These transnational sets of circumstances add another intersectional dimension to patriarchal conventions circulating in Britain, yet one need also bear in mind the pitfalls of demonising Asian men as retrograde and violent abusers as part of the continuing legacy of Orientalism.⁴

What has not been adequately considered is how the presence of violence - whether it be sexual, physical, verbal, psychological, economic - in relatively established relationships might be navigated and countered in a space where 'no' becomes entangled in other emotions of conviviality and ambivalence. This may of course dredge out the patriarchal understanding - that 'no means not really no' and even, 'no means yes', that the female speaker in question cannot even know what no means. But can there be a feminist or womanist rendering of the ambiguities of 'no'? Can 'no as not really no' be seen in a different light, a light in which the rights, autonomy and dignity of the 'victim' are not compromised? In short, can we know no from other angles without falling down a patriarchal trap?

Sweet Swearing

The drama is called *Mishti Gals* (meaning 'sweet swearing' in Bengali) and focuses on the lives of three unmarried British Asian/Bengali professional women, long-term friends now in their forties.⁵ [Figure 1] Two of the characters, Shubarna and Lata, are single, the third, Mou - whose story we highlight here - is a fiery and irrepressible reporter stuck in a pathological relationship with a man who works as a mechanic in a garage

called Sangram. All three are Muslim but, unlike mainstream representations, their religious outlooks are incidental to the kaleidoscopic dynamism of their force of character.

Mou might be tied down in an abusive relationship but she is not subordinated to it. In fact, it could be described as a 'mutually abusive' arrangement for it was one in which she too gives her partner a run for his money with a good dose of retributive violence. This is not to view aggressive retribution as a solution - for Judy battering Mr Punch, as the British seaside stock-in-trade puppets go, leaves us nowhere; only to observe that Mou's refusal to be a victim far outweighed the fixity of victim-perpetrator roles and reworked themselves as something else. This might be illustrated with excerpts from the script:

Shubarna Mou Khan!

Mou Speak Shubarna Rahman.

Shubarna Why do you have the eye of a panda?

Mou He hit me. What else?

Lata Again?

Mou It's become a habit!

Lata (*peering under the eye*) My god!

Mou Oh, it's fine. I gave him one as well. Much bigger than this, I tell you. I tore that bastard so much, *blood* was leaking out of him.

Shubarna When are you going to put a stop to this?

Lata Who started it today? How dare he punch you -

[...]

Shubarna Let him come here, on his knees and beg for forgiveness.

Lata Here? No way! Unwashed. Scoundrel.

Shubarna Good, you haven't married him.

Mou Perish the thought!

Lata I bet he smells of diesel. Not the after-shave. The petrol thing.

[..]

Shubarna You can walk out. [Figure 2]

Mou I will.

Lata (*sighs*) And get another one.

Mou bursts out in laughter.

Mou Let me finish with this illegitimate first. (*pause*). He's a good man.

Lata Give me one any day.

Domestic violence is met with retaliation and rebuttal, a situation that Mou feels like she is in control of. She may have received a black eye, but she responds by tearing Sangram apart so much so that blood seeped out of him. Suggestions to leave him are met with a promise that she will, but she had to 'finish with him first'. A 'finishing with' or a 'finishing of' is purposefully left equivocal. Ultimately, Mou admits that, despite all his flaws, he is a 'good man'. It is this that acts as the male magnet's pull, a reflexive comparison that overcomes any desire to issue an ultimatum to him for the time being.

Mou's volatile relationship is also mirrored with others in her life. It becomes apparent that she has a promiscuous and inevitably dispensable relationship with a work colleague, next to whom Sangram stood out as a reliable rock. At another point in the play when the three women drink a celebratory glass of wine to their enduring friendship on top of Shubarna's day of initiation into alcohol, Mou's phone rings.

Mou Hello. Han, bolo Pradeep. (*listens for some time and then erupts*) And who the hell is he to fire me?...I knew it. I'm sure that bony ass *randi* is behind all this. (*listens*) I've slogged and researched for months, man!...Moral turpitude! Wah wah wah! Look who is talking. That London-Shard-son-of-a-prick wants to sack me for my moral turpitude?... What a *sala!* Cowards!...No, I won't mention your name. Now go and sleep in your wife's arms. Thanks...for telling me, *yaar*.

Mou drops the phone in her handbag.

Mou I was expecting this.

Lata and Shubarna are looking at her.

Lata Moral turpitude?

Mou Come on gals! What's come over you now?

Shubarna We were so happy. And now this -

Lata They fire you on a Sunday!!

Mou They don't know whether it's night or day, half the time. I was bored stiff there anyway. I'll just freelance. More money in it. Then I'll buy a new Alfa Romeo.

Lata What do you need cars for? You've got your hunky *garagewala* [man who works in a garage]

Mou For the time being...You know why we had a fight today?

Lata Tell us everything. Including all the gory details.

Mou He gets so jealous, that Sangram. I just have to look at someone and he goes incredibly green like the Hulk. (*Puts on a rough voice mimicking Sangram*) D'you know him, huh? What you looking at?!!!

Shubarna Does he beat you a lot?

Mou I beat him more. The other day I broke a jar of mango chutney on his head.

Shubarna Is this love?

Lata It's one shade of it.

Mou And there are fifty shades at least.

Shubarna Leave him!

Mou And sit at home like a nun? No thank you ma'am.

Shubarna Then get beaten.

Mou Yes and beat him too. I'll roast him like popcorn. But I won't go back now. I'll stay here.

Shubarna Yes you have to.

Mou It'll be party-sharty every single day.

[Figure 3]

Mou reveals that it is Sangram's sense of vulnerability that leads to his violence - jealousy over other men's interest in her. When he feels like he's losing her attention, his response is nothing short of 'hard man' hypermasculinity.⁶ Still, Mou remains someone he cannot overpower nor control. Come what may, Mou retaliates with free and often imaginative abandon.

Mou's behaviour demonstrates a tenuous relationship with feminist creed, veering more towards a neo-liberal expression of single-minded careerism. This self-reliance is also born out of a rejection of the narrow tracks that social convention lays down for mature Asian women:

Mou What troll bitches we are!

Shubarna We're not bad. Self-sufficient. Earn.

Lata Spend. Self-centred. Do nothing for society.

Mou Without commitment. No children. No cares.

Lata No game. No aim.

Shubarna No ideology. We're not even feminists.

Lata We're not even a team. We're a...

Mou ---situation.

Lata Officially, we are all apes.

Mou Gorillas.

Lata Gorilla girls.

Mou Strong as Kong.

Shubarna Theresa May, Angela Merkel...

Mou Hilary Clinton. Eat your heart out.

Lata (*elbowing Mou while still staring out*) You're the Donald Trump in this relationship. A tyrant.

Mou Ha! Blow money, smoke, drink, eat. One man after another.
Mou mimics moving from profile to profile on Tinder with her finger.

Lata (*giggles*) Shee! What women we are!

Mou Decadent! But happy. We're happy.

Lata Unashamedly happy.

Mou Happily unashamed.

Lata Abominably.

Mou Obscenely.

Lata We're bad Bongs [Bengalis].

Shubarna What will the world say about us?

Lata Fuck the world!

Mou True. Not one man, but fuck the whole world, and happiness is yours.

[Figure 4]

Any glimmer of salvation lay not in others, but in the self and its inveterate and unpredictable needs. The women had resisted social pressures to get married and have their obligatory '2.2 children' before their fertility shelf life expires. Even if ostracised, they had little care for what others had to say about them.⁷ They remain at the helm steering their own ships onwards through waters, choppy or serene.

Towards the end of the play, Sangram tries to make amends and comes to see Mou in her friends' apartment. He is not allowed in, however, and is forced to remain outside the high-rise building. Lata sees him first out of the apartment window and calls Mou over.

Mou (*looking down*) So when did this prime S.O.B. get here?...

Lata (*shouting out of the window*) You wife-beater!

Mou Wife? Not so fast!

[...]

Shubarna He looks like a waffle with that shirt on.

Mou Sangram, Sangram, Sangram.

Lata I can smell his diesel up here.

Shubarna That's just the fragrant smell of east London.

Mou looks around, sees a porcelain flower vase and hurls it down. We hear the sound of it breaking on the footpath below.

Shubarna Eh, my vase! That was from...

Lata Don't fret! We'll get you another one.

Shubarna Never mind. (*looks down*) He looks plastered.

[...]

Shubarna goes and draws the blinds melodramatically. We hear Sangram calling 'Mou, Mou, Mou'.

Lata He definitely sounds like an alley cat now. Is this what you have to live with?

Shubarna Sangram, go home!

Shubarna pours wine into her glass. Lata watches this former teetotaller in fascination. Mou looks resigned.

Shubarna We three will live together.

Lata Two muskyteers will now become three minxyteers.

Shubarna The more the merrier. We'll cook in turns.

Lata shakes her head violently.

Lata We'll shop, see movies

Shubarna Drink every day if you want to. But you're staying here, OK?

Mou I can't live like this. I'm now jobless... Jobless with moral turpitude.

Shubarna The decision's made. You're staying here.

Mou touches Shubarna's cheek affectionately, begins to collect her things and puts them in her bag.

Shubarna (*abruptly*) What? Leaving?

Lata (unhappily) Yea, you can see that.

Shubarna Why so quick?

Mou You won't understand.

Shubarna I don't need to.

Lata She didn't mean to be rude, Mou.

Mou goes to the window, looks out, comes back, picks up an alarm clock from the sideboard and throws it down at him.

Lata (in anguish) That was an antique!

Mou It's a salaam with an alarm.

Mou is still looking around the apartment for more things to throw out. She is about to grab a porcelain figure when Lata hurriedly offers her an empty wine bottle. Mou throws that out. Then she comes to the sofa, sits and covers her face with her hands.

Lata You better go Mou.

Mou I didn't mean to hurt you. I have to go.

Shubarna (cold) That's OK.

Mou We're still friends, aren't we?

Lata Of course, silly.

Mou picks up the bag and is about to leave.

Shubarna Come again (pause) if you need to.

Mou (smiling) To the transit lounge? Of course.

[Figure 5]

The Transit Lounge

In the course of responding to our opening questions about why some individuals stay on with their abusive partners, we have reflected on other positions that might exist apart from victim-perpetrator, abused-abuser. While it is certainly the case that women might be brutally maltreated in cases of domestic aggression, they might also rise against this victim

position in a variety of ways. Mou's story reveals the trenchant attraction-repulsion poles of a magnet in which violence inheres. It is not a case of clear roles, boundaries and situations, one of the main reasons why legislative pursuits are rendered fraught in certain circumstances. While we want Mou to pull herself out of what on the face of it appears like a pathological relationship - as her friends Shubarna and Lata also try to do - we also feel her and their exasperation, for no matter what they do or however hard they try, Mou is pulled back in to the bond that repels her. Importantly, however, she does this not as a victim, but as an agent of her own desires - one where she too might be a perpetrator, one where she is embroiled in conflicting emotions that momentarily empower and enfeeble her, and one where her other relationships with her friends and colleagues are also refracted.

'No means no', for sure, and Mou may well believe in such a stance when she made the decision to leave Sangram and come and stay with her friends. But at other points, she erodes into a sea of memories, a broth of emotional responsibilities and dependencies, a game of waiting where she does her time before she finishes off/with this man before moving on to another whenever and if ever that desire arises. Agency remains with her for, on the whole, it is she who calls the shots. It is she who has the colloquial cake and eats it too. With such a larger-than-life character, it could not be anything else. The caveat is that whatever Mou's decision - whether it be no, yes, or something in between - it is one that is time-sensitive and one she makes away from patriarchal expectations that women be necessarily tied into submission, wedlock and/or reproduction, whether they want to or not.

[Figure 6]

¹ Brexit refers to 'Britain Exit' decided by a slim majority (51.89%) who voted to leave the European Union in a referendum in June 2016.

² This is not to forget women-on-men aggression nor violence and abuse in non-heteronormative relationships. See Anna Griffiths (2013) *An Investigation into Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence*, PhD

thesis, University of Birmingham.
<http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/4713/1/Griffiths13ForenPsyD.pdf>

³ See <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures> Accessed 4 July, 2017.

⁴ See Edward Said (1978) *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books.

⁵ *Mishti Gals* was written by Raminder Kaur and inspired by the play, *Sonata*, by Mahesh Elkunchwar. The play was directed by Mukul Ahmed, produced by Mukul and Ghetto Tigers and Sohaya Visions for the 2016 Season of Bangla Drama festival, and supported by the Arts Council of England, Tower Hamlets Council, University of Sussex Asia Centre, the Canary Wharf Group and ATN Bangla. It starred Saima Ahmed as Mou, Saida Tani as Lata and Urme Mazhar as Shubarna, <http://www.sohayavisions.com/our-story>

⁶ See Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2012) https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_we_should_all_be_feminists Accessed 29 June, 2017.

⁷ This erstwhile national average has dropped significantly, hovering now around 1.8 children per couple, but varies across ethno-racial groups. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN> Accessed 4 July, 2017.