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INTERVIEW

Portrait of the Feminist as a Publisher: A Conversation with Urvashi Butalia

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Sandrine Sanos, Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi

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In the South Asian subcontinent, Urvashi Butalia needs little introduction. Since she started the first feminist publishing house in India, Kali for Women, in 1984, she has become one of India's foremost feminists, and her tireless work—academic and activist—over the decades has shown a commitment to the unearthing and dissemination of women's voices and the rewriting of history. Her work is driven by the guiding principle that feminist knowledge production acts as a tool of political change.

Butalia's best-known work, *The Other Side of Silence* (1998), made an invaluable contribution to scholarship on the 1947 partition of India—the division of British India into India and Pakistan along religious lines—by reconstructing this cataclysmic historical event through testimonies and oral histories of women that were affected by the violence (whether as rape victims, victims of familial violence, or victims of the state's need to legitimate itself through recovering women “lost” across national borders during the chaos of the partition). In a larger sense, Butalia's gendered history of partition issued a clarion call for the importance of regarding

gender as a central category for understanding Indian history (and history in general). In addition, this book reflects what has been the author's foremost concern throughout her career: women's implication in conflict, whether communal, military, ethnic, caste, or familial. Butalia has highlighted and examined women's relationship to violence in a nuanced manner, considering them both as victims and as agents or perpetrators. For instance, in the 2002 collection she edited, *Speaking Peace: Women's Voices from Kashmir* (2002), Butalia seeks to fill a gap in knowledge regarding the effects, especially on women's lives, of living in the conflict-ridden northern Indian region of Kashmir. In *Women and Right-Wing Movements* (1995), Butalia and historian Tanika Sarkar offer a collection of essays that speak of the urgent need to understand and confront the phenomenon of women as willing participants in violence within the context of the rise of militant women within right-wing Hindu political formations. Her work interrogates the complicated and contingent relation between gender, the state, and violence.

In many ways, Butalia's career since the 1980s provides a capsule for the feminist movement in India and its evolving emphases and challenges—from protests over dowry, sati, and custodial rape to the rise of

women's involvement in the Hindu right and other ethnic nationalist movements, as well as new articulations of "the woman question" within the context of globalization in contemporary India. Collectively, Butalia's work provides a nuanced insight into the intricate and intimate relationship between women, nation, and community in India.

Currently, in her work as the founder and director of the publishing house Zubaan (founded in 2003 as a new offshoot of Kali for Women), Butalia remains committed to building and increasing the body of knowledge on a diverse range of gender and human rights issues in the global South. In 2006, she translated into English and published *A Life Less Ordinary*, the memoir of Baby Halder, a domestic worker in Delhi. Over the past decade, Zubaan has been building a formidable list of titles, including autobiographies and fiction by women writers, children's books, and academic studies. Zubaan also launched a project titled "Poster Women" to gather and document posters produced by women's groups over the decades, a database that offers a fascinating visual history of the Indian women's movement.

In the following interview, Butalia reflects on her feminist publishing work, the difficulties of recuperating and recording women's voices, and changes in the Indian women's movement, among other topics.

Anupama Arora and Sandrine Sanos: Throughout your career, you have worked (and continue to work) on a variety of issues and topics—the founding of India's first feminist publishing house, women's oral histories, violence and gender, women and religious fundamentalism. What would you say is the driving principle behind your involvement in all these endeavors? What does it mean to you to have been a "feminist" then and to be a feminist now?

Urvashi Butalia: Being a feminist to me means really living what you believe in, in every possible way. For me, there is no division between the way in which my feminism informs my personal life, or my public life, my workplace, my home, my relationships, my family, what I write, and of course, my activism. I've always said that to me feminism is a very simple philosophy: it means recognizing that every human being, no matter from what gender or class or region or location or religion, has a right to a life of dignity. Often when I say this, people respond by saying that this is just like humanism. In fact it is not, for humanism has by and large forgotten about women and feminism doesn't. So how does it inform my daily life? I try to run a feminist office, where everyone is valued, and feminist principles inform the ways in which I deal with my colleagues and our authors, and indeed our readers. At home, I try to work in ways that are fair and egalitarian. For example, in our office, we work on "flexi time" to allow my colleagues time to deal with their "other" lives, such as taking a child to school or having the water tank repaired. One of my colleagues is a single mother and two are single women. For my male colleagues, the flexi time helps them share in household tasks. We cook lunch in the office; we have a cook who gives us freshly cooked food every day. This saves my colleagues both money and time; people can bring their children to the office if they need to, and while the lines of responsibility are very clear, the office is an open and nonhierarchical space. At home, I have a young woman who comes in to help with domestic tasks, and she brings her little daughter with her. I have taught her to drive, and whenever she has a family event, she borrows my car. This ensures that her family also sees her differently. There are so many other such things. I have often thought one day I should write one of those "how to" books that should earn millions, except that it would be on how to run a feminist workplace, and I'm not sure there would be millions there! To me, feminism is as important, as vital, and as necessary as breathing. Without it, I don't think I would be "alive."

It's also difficult because being a feminist and being aware of your feminism means very often that you "see" the ways in which patriarchal power plays out, in simple acts, and you question these. But at the same time, you balance out when it is important to question things and when you let them be—that is sometimes the most difficult battle. For example, I am very much a "family person," and I am close to my siblings, and to my nieces and nephews, but that does not mean that I wholly support the family as an institution. And yet I try not to judge people who do, but give them the respect of their beliefs and engage in dialogue and discussion with them. I think my feminism has evolved over the years—inevitably, I guess. I'm no longer the angry young woman I used to be, and my responses are more measured and more thought out, but that does not mean my politics has in any way been diluted. If anything, my critique of patriarchy has become deeper and stronger.

Publishing

AA & SS: Your book on the state of feminist publishing, *Making a Difference: Feminist Publishing in the South* (1995), is an unusual publication—yet an important one in light of your work as a publisher. It poses the question of the production and dissemination of (feminist) knowledge and the concrete strategies needed for that work. Now you have shifted your publishing activities with the creation of Zubaan Books. How would you rewrite the epilogue to *Making a Difference* today? How has the political and practical task of publishing changed (or not)? What are the challenges and possibilities in this historical moment?

UB: In many ways things have changed a lot, but in other ways they have remained the same. We are looking at a radically transformed publishing environment, internationally and in India. The printed book is under threat, the electronic book has not yet caught on enough in our societies to give us hope. In India now, all important publishers, big or small, Indian language or English, publish women writers and books about and by women. In 1984, when we set out on our project of providing a space for feminist knowledge to emerge, to grow, to spread, we were the only ones in India. Today almost everyone is doing this. The question then, for us, is this: Is there a role for us anymore? Does our success mean our demise? Are we now redundant? And yet, even though we must pose this question, I don't think feminist publishing is redundant—there is so much more to do, so many different kinds of books. Last week, for example, I was in Kashmir, talking to a group of young women in their twenties who recently filed a public-interest litigation demanding the opening up of a case of mass rape that happened in Kashmir 22 years ago. They have collected a mass of material on this case, and we were talking about the possibility of their doing a joint book on the history of this landmark case. They loved the idea, but they lack the writing skills and the confidence, so we will now work with them in developing writing skills and then we'll publish the book. There are many such projects, and we can concentrate our energies—to me, this is what my being a feminist publisher is all about, not publishing only those books that one may call "traditional" feminist texts but going that extra mile, seeking out those voices that don't get heard and then ensuring they find a space.

The changeover from Kali to Zubaan has not meant any radical change in the content of what we publish—we are still the same people, with the same politics and the same priorities, but yes, we have tried to take account of changes in feminism itself, in the women's movement in India, and to reflect these. So over and above our academic books and our more general list, we now do books for young adults, we do a lot of translations, we do more fiction, we will take up books on feminism, feminist humor, we do collectively written or what one might, in today's parlance, call crowdsourced books, we do e-books, we use the social media to promote our books, and we do books that appeal to young people. I believe quite firmly that one must change with the times—we will never become slaves to the market and will always hold our politics

intact, but we will recognize change and publish for it. I guess this is how I would rewrite the epilogue to that book: women's books are no longer marginal, but what we have is by no means enough or adequate or reflective of the complexity of the experiences of all women, of women from different classes, castes, religions, and so on.

An Archive of Silence

AA & SS: Your work is devoted to excavating and creating an archive of those that are silenced and marginalized. In many ways, you are an archivist and historian, though you never say so explicitly. Indeed, in "A Question of Silence: Partition, Women, and the State," you point out how, despite our best efforts, it may be sometimes impossible to recover the testimonies of women who have been subject to the violence that accompanied the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent. How, and why, should we nonetheless create the space for this silence and the absence of these voices?

UB: The more I work with women, the more I realize how difficult it is for them to speak of some things—sexual violence being one, violence at the hands of their families being another. When I started my work on partition, I went into it with a very simple, and what now seems like a simplistic, assumption. History had been silent on the experiences of women; I would step in there and break that silence, recover women's voices, and somehow set right that absence, that gap. Of course the reality was nothing like this, and as I spoke to more and more women I realized that even though the experience of sexual violation was widespread and common, even though everyone knew about it, it could actually never be explicitly named by the women themselves, and it was almost impossible for women to speak about it, even to find the vocabulary to articulate it, to express what they had lived through. Often this was because they were now in families, in marriages, and people in their families either did not know or did not want to know about this particular experience, because it was a matter of shame. Or it was that they mostly spoke to you—the researcher—in family situations, with their men being present, and were therefore not able to speak of the body, of subjects that are considered taboo. Sometimes there were further complexities: many women actually married their rapists, had children with them, how could they now identify them as criminals—their lives were tied to them.

So the question before me was: Could I go on assuming that there was a straightforward equation between breaking silence and somehow liberating speech? Was there an absolute "truth" that I, as researcher, was bound to reveal? And yet, when doing this kind of research, towards whom did my responsibility lie? Towards some abstract notion of truth or to the people, in this case women, who would have to live with the consequences of any "revelation" I might make, any "truth" I might expose? And also, if they could not speak about it, perhaps I could. And so I took a decision and it is something I have stood by all these years: that my primary responsibility was to the women, dead or alive, and I would protect their identities, preserve their secrets, and not expose them.

Let me explain: in one of my research forays to a second-hand bookstore when I was working, I came across a book, a rare document, which is a district-by-district listing of Hindu and Sikh women who were abducted in Pakistan. For many years, people have urged me to put the list up on the net, saying, "Imagine how many stories you will uncover." And as a researcher, I am of course excited at this prospect, but I have not done so, because I believe I cannot expose those women to the scrutiny that will surely ensue; I cannot reveal to their families and those who knew them a history they may not have been aware of, and a history of which, if they find out, they will be ashamed. So to me this becomes one kind of silence, although even if I suppress this document, I can still speak about it... So in some ways you refrain from exposing certain forms

of knowledge but you do not necessarily silence them. You use your own voice—and this realization, that I was a character in my own research, that my voice too needed to be articulated, was for me very important, it freed me in a sense to address issues that the women themselves were unable or unwilling to do.

AA & SS: Historians of gender have long argued that including women in the historical record does not just add another dimension to history but challenges the very foundations upon which history is built. How do you see this being the case for Indian history?

UB: This is so true. Looking at women in history is not a matter of just adding women and stirring; it is a matter of radically transforming the very substance of history itself. I discovered this in the course of my research—the prism of feminism, the attempt to locate women’s histories, allowed me to see how history is played out at the ground level. It was this that alerted me to so many things I might have otherwise missed: the histories of children, of Dalits and low-caste people, of poor people, of transgenders and eunuchs, those on the margins of society, of minorities. Somehow this perspective from below questioned the very foundations on which “traditional” history is built, it questioned its focus on the big players—on kings, rulers, political parties—and turned the mirror elsewhere, saying, “Look, these are also people who lived out the history you’re talking about.” The bit-part players. And it enabled me at least to turn to those aspects of history that are never discussed in conventional history—emotions, feeling, a sense of a moment in time, the experience of having lived through it. There was a time when Indian history was accused of being episodic and was seen as a lesser history because it did not have a linear record of kings and rulers, it did not have timelines that were easily divisible (e.g., ancient, medieval, modern). But actually, even if you focus only on kings and rulers, how in a country like ours—which lives out multiple histories at the same time—could you build a linear narrative? The other accusation was that myth, legend, and stories imposed on history and lent an inaccurate color to it. I find this laughable now. I’m not sure if you’ve read Eduardo Galeano’s trilogy on Latin American history told through myth, *Memory of Fire* (1998). How much deeper that kind of writing allows us to go than a mere linear recounting of what are called “facts.” So, in the course of my work, I became obsessed with the smaller stories and the bit-part actors, and to me this is what history came to mean. Had I not been a feminist, I would never have understood this. I believe this firmly, and I am truly grateful to feminism for alerting me to this. For me, history will never be the same again.

Violence and the State

AA & SS: Much of your recent work has been concerned with the relationship between gender and violence, the violence exercised on women, and the complicity of women in the exercise of violence. Why is such an enterprise crucial?

UB: It’s crucial because we need to understand not only how and where this violence comes from but also how we enable it by being complicit in it. Many women who might protest at violence from men would possibly treat their domestic workers very badly—a notion of class that allows them to inflict both physical and mental violence on those whom they see as “servants.” Many mothers will advise their daughters not to speak out if they are being abused. There is a way in which the family is the sacred cow that has to be preserved at all costs, and we do not ask, What is this family all about? Also, I think we need to recognize that we cannot essentialize women into “nonviolent” people. Look at the attraction that the political right holds for women, the power it gives them over others, the ways in which it encourages them to participate in violence, and the ways in which women respond. So I think that, while we need to understand how the state targets women and how women become the victims of violence, we need to also understand how women are complicit in so many of the structures that strengthen violence. Sometimes they are in this willingly, other times they are caught in it, but if we blind ourselves to their participation, we’ll have only half the picture.

AA & SS: Should we understand the recent scandals regarding gang rapes in light of this longer history of violence on women? After all, as your work traces, the nation and the state are constantly legitimated through an appeal to gender—do you see this at work today as well?

UB: Yes, I think so, we have to. And the history of violence towards women—the emblematic moment for this is the moment of nation-making, the partition of India, which shows dramatically how central women are to the discourse of nation-making and how their bodies are the sites on which battles for honor and identity are waged—is also inextricably interwoven with other histories of oppression, for example through caste. Just as the nation-state sees women as some sort of inferior citizens, their rights always mediated through those of their men, so also it is convenient to marginalize minorities and others.

AA & SS: Yet you suggest the political and historical context has changed significantly. The December 26, 2012 op-ed in *The Hindu* that you wrote in the aftermath of the Delhi bus gang rape was a very nuanced piece: you wrote that the incidence of rape increases “as society goes through change, as women’s roles begin to change, as economies slow down and the slice of the pie becomes smaller.”¹ What might be the different challenges for the Indian women’s movement today, especially regarding confrontation and negotiation with the state?

UB: Indian society has been changing rapidly. There is growth of migration, the increasing urbanization, the blurring of the borders between urban and rural, the ways in which the urban has seeped into the rural and the rural has come into the urban (this latter especially through migration in search of jobs or because of climate change). There is the visible—I say visible because it is visibility that marks it, not scale—entry of women, especially young women, into different kinds of jobs. (Twenty years ago, being a salesgirl in a pizza place would not have been a “respectable” profession for women; today it is.) Then there is the growth of malls and therefore spaces to socialize for young men and women. All these changes and more have led to a rapidly and sometimes radically transformed environment, at least in our cities and small towns. My sense is that this simultaneously makes women stronger and more vulnerable, confident and more at risk.

And also, the state seems to be so indifferent to its poor, those who are on the margins. For instance, look at what is happening to the Muzaffarnagar violence victims now.² No one is really bothered about them because they are Muslim and poor, and because they lead violent and brutalized lives. All of this adds to an already volatile situation in which women become the targets of violence because, of course, violence towards women is so deeply naturalized in Indian society. By this I mean many things. In a society that still has a large population of the poor, people who have to struggle to make ends meet and who are so brutalized that violence becomes a way of life almost, men often turn against those who are most vulnerable, the women. India is a country where religion means a lot to people, and all our religions are discriminatory towards women; this helps in giving violent behavior a kind of religious and social sanction. Then there is the belief in the “superiority” of men. In marriage vows, women are asked to look upon men as their gods and there is this deep preference for sons despite so much evidence that shows it is daughters who look after parents in old age. All of this leads to a kind of acceptability for patriarchal violence, making it seem natural, both on the part of perpetrators and on the part of the victims.

I’d be very interested to see whether the increase in reported incidents of sexual violence in India in any way matches the increase in violence for other crimes. We don’t know enough about this. Is it that the new lifestyles, the increasing differences between rich and poor, are leading to more violence, of which sexual violence against women (for we have to recognize there is sexual violence towards men as well, which is hardly ever talked about) is a part, or is there something different about sexual violence that we need to know?

Contemporary Feminist Politics

AA & SS: It is an axiom for many feminists that “the personal is political.” You wrote a very eloquent and powerful piece recently—“Childless, Naturally”—that reflects on the different meanings of motherhood. It seems that some aspects of women’s lives are still moored in assumptions about women’s “nature,” and that motherhood continues to define women’s sense of their lives. How and why did you feel the need to write this piece, especially at this particular historical moment?

UB: I was actually asked to write a piece on being childless and being happy. This is such a natural and normal state of affairs for me that I had actually never consciously thought about it in a systematic way, although the thoughts might have been in my head. At Zubaan, we decided to do a book on motherhood; we wanted to call it *The Other Mother* or something similar. And when the book began to actually come about, the editor, Jaishree Misra, asked me to write such a piece. Of course I didn’t, as I was battling tight time schedules but also a very strong feeling that I should not be writing for books that are published by us, and time kept running out. Then, in the end, the pressure became the reverse—if I didn’t write it, I felt I would be letting Jaishree down. So I got down to it. I tried to write a somewhat more academic piece, but it didn’t seem to work. In the end, I just thought that I would write it as I felt it, keeping in mind something one of my tutors told me in college when she made me write a paper ten times over, and finally, when I wept and wrote it for the tenth time, she read it and said, It’s a gem, never forget that you must write what you feel! And so I did, and what surprised me about that piece was how widely it resonated. I was quite taken aback when *Mint* newspaper told me that it got so many hits that their website crashed.³ It’s flattering, but it also makes me realize how taboo some aspects of motherhood and the discourse around it are. We just never talk of them, and even as feminists we are unable to address the subject fully. There were so many young women who responded to the piece as well, saying that it reflected what they had been thinking about and grappling with.

Personally, I was very struck by two other pieces in that book, one by a woman who adopted two girls who were older and sisters, and who dealt with the business of learning to love adult children, and another piece on violent mothers.⁴ The one on violent mothers was very disturbing. My own mother was someone who battled against this business of being a “good” mother, and I so appreciated her resolute determination to stay out of the kitchen. And, in my work with Mona, the *hijra*, the question of motherhood came up again and again. In my piece on motherhood, I talk about how Mona—a man till the age of 18 and then a hijra and later physically a woman—had one overwhelming desire, to become a mother, and so she adopted a child and actually “learned” motherhood, and that made me ask how natural was this thing really.⁵ I’ve been thinking about it on and off, and writing this piece gave me the opportunity to at least try and put some of those thoughts down.

AA & SS: Feminists have long argued for “global feminist sisterhood,” while also highlighting limitations of this concept, especially in the face of asymmetrical power relations and the long tradition of the West imagining the non-West as the site of women’s oppression through the lens of Orientalist and civilizational discourse. How might we imagine global/transnational feminist solidarities in the world that we inhabit today?

UB: I think solidarities are really important, but I am also constantly taken aback by how little has changed in the global feminist discourse. Western feminists refuse to recognize, or are willfully unaware of, the rich and fascinating history of feminism in our parts of the world, and continue to see us as merely sites of oppression, completely ignoring the existence of a dynamic and rich women’s movement here. This has become so clear in the last year, in the wake of the protests about the rape of a medical student on December

16, 2012. The eye of the international media was, as you know, firmly trained upon India and particularly Delhi, and Delhi was being called “the rape capital of the world.” Western feminists too, immediately and unproblematically, internalized this discourse without ever looking at simple things like figures of rape in their own countries. So for example, if you just take the year 2011 and look at rape statistics across the world, you’ll find the US occupies quite a prominent place on that list. Of course, this is not a race in which one is ahead and the other behind, and even one rape is one rape too many. But it’s important to get a perspective on things. I cannot tell you how many journalists, men and women, feminists and non-feminists, I spoke to during that time who reiterated what a terrible place India was for women and who asked, in tones of surprise, How do you manage to live there? Yet, as you know, this terrible reality is not the only reality of women’s lives here. Also, with feminists, there was another piece of arrogance and ignorance: one woman journalist from France asked me, Now that India has television and Internet, and Indian women can learn about feminism in the West, don’t you think things will improve for you? Another, a German woman politician, supposedly very progressive, said she was so sorry for her Indian sisters and wanted to help them. I wanted to say, Thank you very much, but we are quite capable of helping ourselves. Similarly, in the wake of the protests last year, a group of women academics from Harvard put together a project to work in India and to help Indian women and the Indian government learn how to implement the Verma Committee Report.⁶ How arrogant is that? And then you get into a conversation with an American feminist, say, or someone from Europe, and you’ll often find that the Indian woman can talk to you about the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Rosa Luxemburg, Christa Wolf, and others. But which American feminist will even know about Tarabai Shinde and Pandita Ramabai, let alone have read them? And a further question: When was the last time you heard of women’s groups in the US demonstrating against rape? At least here we don’t hide the violence, and we don’t let it go off the public agenda.

I’m sorry if this sounds like a rant. I don’t usually rant, but this willful ignorance and the somewhat patronizing condescension really disturbs me. Particularly because I think the feminist movement across the world has been one of the movements that have gained so much from internationalization; there have been so many valuable connections across the world that we should find a way of preserving those and find a way of learning not to see feminism as some kind of hierarchy or race where some people are ahead and others behind, and all have the same goal. There is no one-size-fits-all here; yes, there are many things that are common non-negotiables, such as no violence against women, but there are also differences, and that is what makes our many movements so rich. Is it so difficult to recognize this?

Is it so difficult to recognize the ways in which power has played out historically in the world, and to see it doing so today? I think one of our tragedies is that as feminists we have not been able to see—or perhaps we refuse to see—how we are implicated in the geopolitics of our nation-states. Why, for example, were there no statements by American, British or French feminists about the ways in which the US intervened in Afghanistan and Iraq—citing the status of women as one reason for implementing “regime change”? Both countries have had strong women; and Afghanistan has had such a strong women’s movement. Why was there no reference to that, and no solidarity with the women who were fighting there?

AA & SS: What kind of feminism do you see evolving in India today and what specific possibilities and challenges do you see for its future?

UB: This question is really difficult to answer. One thing I can say is that the events of the last year have shown several things: first, that feminism has come a long way in India in being able to be nuanced, complex, and to take account of difference. This was clear in feminist responses to the December 16 incident, but also the ways in which feminists led the protests, understood the political strains and different needs

within (for instance, those of young people, men, women, families), argued against the death penalty, tried to get political parties across the spectrum to come together on the rights of women, negotiated with the Verma Committee to be allowed to speak, systematically prepared their submissions, worked with the state on the law, appreciated the gains the law had made, critiqued its lacks, but did not refuse to work with the state. Twenty years ago, we would have rejected the halfway house the new law is, and would have refused to negotiate with the state. Not so today. While feminists retain their critique of the state, they also are willing to work with it. Or perhaps I should say that they are willing to work with it in limited ways. With the rape law, for example, while feminists are opposed to the death penalty and will continue to work to get rid of it, they nonetheless have the knowledge and expertise in other areas, such as dealing with the issue of medical evidence (after doing extensive research in hospitals), or other similar areas, and they are willing to collaborate with state agencies in using this knowledge to bring about a better environment in which sexual violence can be addressed without violating the rights of the victim. Recently, feminist groups have worked with the Ministry of Health in putting together a set of guidelines on how the medical establishment can deal sensitively with victims of sexual violence, and these are now going to be implemented in hospitals on a wide scale. It is this kind of collaboration that feminists are willing to take on. Also, I see a considerable amount of self-questioning and reflection—such as, did we do right to ask for this kind of change, how does it play out in people’s lives, and so on. There is a sort of maturity. Perhaps it’s because many of us have aged!

Notes

Anupama Arora is Associate Professor of English and Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. She teaches and writes about postcolonial literature, especially from South Asia and its diaspora.

Sandrine Sanos is Associate Professor of Modern European History at Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi. She is the author of *The Aesthetics of Hate: Far-Right Intellectuals, Antisemitism, and Gender in 1930s France* (Stanford, 2012).

1. “Let’s Ask How We Contribute to Rape,” *The Hindu*, December 26, 2012. <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/lets-ask-how-we-contribute-to-rape/article4235902.ece>.

2. In August 2013, riots broke out between Hindu and Muslim communities in the Muzaffarnagar district in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. According to some estimates, around 9,000 families were affected by these riots and are still living in relief camps in pitiful conditions.

3. “Childless, Naturally” was originally published in *Mint* on March 25, 2013. <http://www.livemint.com/Leisure/jEGOb532oWMOVI1boGOfGN/Urvashi-Butalia--Childless-naturally.html>.

4. See Jaishree Mitra, ed. *Of Mothers and Others: Stories, Essays, Poems*. New Delhi: Zubaan Books/Save the Children Fund, 2013.

5. Butalia is currently at work on a book on the story of Mona, a *hijra*, or someone who belongs to the “third gender” or the community of transgendered people in India. She has written about Mona in *Granta*; see <http://www.granta.com/New-Writing/Monas-Story>.

6. The Verma Committee Report refers to the report submitted by the three-member commission, headed by former Chief Justice of India J.S. Verma, that was assigned to review laws for sexual crimes. In the aftermath of the gang rape

and murder of a young woman in New Delhi on December 16, 2012, the Harvard College Women's Center set up a Harvard Policy Task Force, which "invite[d] members of the Harvard community to contribute to a Policy Task Force titled 'Beyond Gender Equality,' convened to offer recommendations to India and other South Asian countries in the wake of the New Delhi gang rape and murder." In response to this, Butalia, along with a group of Indian feminists, wrote an open letter criticizing this move. See <http://hcwc.wordpress.com/2013/02/15/a-history-of-violence/> and <http://kafila.org/2013/02/20/dear-sisters-and-brothers-at-harvard/>.

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Excerpts from Urvashi Butalia's Work

From "A Question of Silence: Partition, Women and the State," in *Gender and Catastrophe*, edited by Ronit Lentin (Zed Books, 1997).

Why did the woman's body become so important at this time, both to the community (and the family) as well as the state? The question is important, for both the Indian and Pakistani states at this time were preoccupied with problems of unexpected magnitude. Millions of refugees needed to be housed, compensated and [had to be] found jobs. The violence that accompanied and followed Partition needed somehow to be contained; rail and other transport services restored; international credibility gained; assets and liabilities divided and fought over ... the list is endless. Why did *women*, marginalized at the best of times, assume such importance at this time of catastrophe?

There is little doubt that the Indian state needed to regain some measure of legitimacy. Consider some of the problems it was facing: many more people flowed into India than had left from there. This created an imbalance in the amount of property that was available to be distributed to refugees in India, and the amount those refugees had left behind. Almost everyone had to be content with less than they had had. Many of those who poured into the country had been involved in somewhat "higher" professions (moneylenders, teachers, doctors, farmers, shopkeepers) than those who left (barbers, tailors, shoemakers, ironsmiths and so on). There was little room to accommodate refugees in the same professions they had left behind, and

many had to learn to declass themselves in order to be able to earn some sort of a livelihood. Thousands of women had been widowed—they had to be provided with housing and jobs. Orphaned children posed another problem. And then, there was a machinery to be set up so that people could come away safely, and, if necessary, return to their homes to settle their affairs. Much of this task was left to the army, considered a neutral institution. But, at this time, the army itself was communalized and divided, with soldiers and officers being asked to choose which country they wished to belong to. And so on.

These were not problems that had easy or quick solutions. And all of them needed to be judged on tangible results: if a certain number of refugees had been adequately housed, for example, the state could claim this operation a success. With women, however, the situation was different. The moment the rescue operation was mounted, the state assumed a moral legitimacy, for it took on itself the role of parent, and began the search for its “daughters.” It is true that there was considerable criticism, both in the media and within the Legislative Assembly, in the debates that took place on the subject, of what was seen as the poor performance of the government in not having rescued adequate numbers of women. Nonetheless, the fact that the operation had been mounted at all was of importance. The women became crucial to the legitimacy of the state: if they could be recovered, and indeed if they could be “purified” and reabsorbed into the fold of the community, the state would have legitimized itself.

Communities and families too needed similar legitimacy. At its most crass, their actions in killing women and children, or exhorting the women to take their own lives, can be read as attempts to rid themselves of inconvenient encumbrances so that they could get away. For many of them, their getting away was equated in their minds with the preservation of the “religion”—for once in India, they could marry again, procreate, and create a new line of pure believers. Once again, this burden had to be carried by women: their bodies became the pure terrain of religion, which could, of course, be guarded only through death. I do not wish to suggest here that the women were mere instruments in the hands of men, and that they had no feeling either for what one might call the homeland, or for religion. There must have been many cases where women took their own lives. Equally, there were many abducted women who wanted to return to India, just as there were others who did not. But we shall, in all likelihood, never know how these women felt. Those who are still alive have no wish to recount these histories again. And the only accounts we have of their experiences are those that have been written, largely by male historians (which in itself is not necessarily something one should dismiss) and largely based on so-called facts and documents. These tell only one kind of story.

But while there was a similarity in how the state and the family/community saw women as carrying the honour of both, there were also differences in how both approached the question of women. For the community it was the woman’s sexual purity that became important, as well as her community and/or religious identity. For the state, because the women it was rescuing were already sexually “impure,” having often lived with their captors, this problem had to be approached differently by making the religious identity paramount, and emphasizing how some states of impurity were less impure than others because the women had lived in these states involuntarily. It was this also that made it necessary to continue to emphasize abduction. Hence Gandhi’s exhortations to families to take their sisters and daughters back. Gandhi’s and Nehru’s were not the only exhortations: the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation is said to have issued a pamphlet which quoted Manu to establish that a woman who had had sexual congress with someone other than her husband became purified after three menstrual cycles, and hence her family could accept her back. Similarly, we were told in one of our interviews that stories were published which openly accepted that Sita had had sexual congress with Ravana, despite which she remained pure.

The initial impetus to recover those family members who had been lost, most of whom happened to be

women, was a natural reaction. Families had been torn apart and many wanted to be whole again. But the sheer practical difficulties made it impossible for individuals to mount recovery efforts, so they then turned to the state. Other things underlay this: for men, who had justified the killing of women as “protection,” the fact that many of “their” women, or indeed women belonging to their religion, had been abducted (no matter that some women may have chosen to go, they had to be seen as being forcibly abducted), meant a kind of collapse, almost an emasculation of their own agency. Unequal to this task, they now had to hand it over to the state, the new patriarch, the new national family. As the central patriarch, the state now provided coercive backing for restoring and reinforcing patriarchy within the family.

For the post-colonial, deeply contested, fragile and vulnerable state, this was an exercise in restoring its legitimacy which, I would suggest, depended very much on recovering what had been lost: a part of itself, a piece, if you like, of its body, and with it, prestige, honour and property. The recovery of women became the recovery of all these, and symbolically of legitimacy and honour which rested on the backs of, and in the bodies of women. Thus the state acted on its own behalf and on behalf of those communities who invested it with agency on their behalf; and for its self-legitimation, the question of gender became crucial.

The state’s rescue operation could be said to have been premised on the fact that the state had no obligation towards its subject citizens to whose plight it could not remain indifferent. But, being women, these subject citizens were treated unequally, and therefore could not be given a choice in where they could stay. So deep was the ambivalence between seeing the woman as a person and a citizen that an ordinary police officer had the right to decide whether a woman had been abducted or not and which was her proper homeland; he had the right to force her to go there, and to pull her out of a situation in which she may well have wanted to stay.

Within parliament, some members objected strongly to this denial of rights to women. One member, Mahavir Tyagi, pointed to the crux of the problem when (speaking of Muslim women recovered from India) he said that: “these women are citizens of India ... they were born in India itself. In taking them to Pakistan without their consent ... shall we not contravene the fundamental rights sanctioned by the Constitution?... The fact that their husbands have gone to Pakistan does not deprive the adult wife of her rights of citizenship. They have their own choice to make.” Nonetheless, this choice was denied to women.

It is against this backdrop that we need to look at the women who resisted. For, although there were many who did resettle back into their families, there were others who did not want to be uprooted and dislocated again, who did resist and who refused to come back. It was towards these women that the rescue effort was especially directed: these were the women who had, by marrying, consorting with, and having children by, the “other,” transgressed the bounds set for them. There is no doubt that resistance, of whatever kind, and however small, was an act of courage, especially when the dice were so heavily loaded against them. But not everyone was able to resist, and many stories that survive provide evidence of this.

I would like to end this account with the story of a young Muslim woman who was sold to a Sikh from Amritsar district. Buta Singh and Zainab fell in love and married, and had two children, both girls. For several years after her disappearance, the girl’s relatives, who lived on lands contiguous to the family’s, made attempts to trace her. Finally, six years after her “abduction” she was traced to Amritsar where she was now married and living with Buta Singh. Zainab refused to return, but the family was also adamant, as they wished to marry her into the family in order to keep the land which would otherwise be taken over by the state. She was taken away by force, but was allowed to bring her younger child with her. Buta Singh made desperate attempts to get to Pakistan, and all the while the two kept in touch by correspondence. Finally he converted to Islam and found his way to Zainab’s village. There, Zainab had already been married

off to her cousin. The case came up before the tribunal and Buta Singh was confident that Zainab would choose to come back to him, but so strong was the family pressure on her that in court she rejected Buta Singh and returned their child to him. The bereft man then committed suicide and the case was talked about widely in the media. If, in spite of everything, Zainab could submit to family pressure in such a way, one wonders how many women would actually have the courage to speak up before the tribunal.

The silence that has surrounded these issues is part of the general silence on the pain and trauma of Partition. At the same time the silence about women's experiences specifically suggests something different: for what are at stake here are not only questions of state, but also questions of identity, of agency, of religion and of sexuality. As far as the Indian state was concerned, women were defined in terms of their religious identities (an unusual stance for a supposedly secular state to take)—they were either Hindu or Muslim. And the children of mixed unions, apart from being visible reminders of these, did not fit easily into either category.

Whatever accounts I have also suggest that there was considerable difference in the attitude of the two countries to the question of abduction. While both signed the treaty, Pakistan did not bring in legislation as India did; also, it seems as if on the whole Muslim families were more willing to take Muslim women back than Hindu families were, perhaps because Islam does not have the same codes of purity and pollution that Hinduism does. Some expressed reluctance, but it seems they were few in number. The Indian state's identification of women as primarily belonging to their religion did not go without question among women social workers. There are many accounts of how people like Damyanti Sahgal, Kamlaben Patel and others helped women in their camps to go back to their abductors, often putting their own jobs at risk. Anis Kidwai questioned how much meaning religion had for Muslim and Hindu women:

And what does she know of religion anyway? At least men have the opportunity to go to the mosque, and pray, but the women, Muslims have never allowed them to stand up. The moment they see young women their eyes become full of blood: run away, they tell them, go off. What are you doing here... the culprit is within themselves, but it is the women they make run away—if they come into the *masjid* the whole *namaz* is ruined. If they try to listen to the last call of the month of *ramzan*, everyone's attention is distracted ... if they go into a *quawali*, the sufis will turn their attention from god to the world....

It is difficult to begin to understand the experiences of these women for there is almost no way in which we can recover their voices—nor, if we can, is it really desirable to do so. They will, therefore, perforce have to remain silent. What happened with abducted women during Partition is in many ways similar to what we see today—that during communal strife and violence, it is often women who are the most talked about, but once such violence is over, a silence also seems to descend about women. The story of these women is by no means over. Today, more than ever, it is becoming important for us to examine how women are inscribed into communal situations, how they locate themselves there, what their relationship with religion is; also how the state constructs women, and indeed the kinds of responses that we need to direct at the state. For this it is as important to explore our history as it is to do some introspection into our present—informed, hopefully, and educated, by the perspective of the past.

From “Childless, Naturally: Reflections on Not Being a Mother,” in *Of Mothers and Others: Stories, Essays, Poems*, edited by Jaishree Misra (Zubaan Books/Save the Children Fund, 2013).

It has been two years since the man I nearly married and I decided to part. On a balmy evening, the leaves stirring gently behind us, we sit in a restaurant talking. The heartbreak is over, the friendship intact. We talk about what we shared, why we decided to go our separate ways and then, he surprises me by saying: “You know the one thing I do regret is that we would have had such lovely children, and you, you’d have made a fantastic mother, you’re such a natural.” A natural? Me? What has he based this judgment on, I wonder, and what does it mean? It’s true that I love children—I did then and I do now, indeed I only have to see one on the road walking with or being carried by a parent and I “naturally” veer that way. But does that mean I had what it took to be a good mother? I’m not at all sure.

Thirty years later. I am still single, I still love children. I’ve become familiar with the question: Why have you never married? Don’t you feel you need a relationship? Are you not lonely? Don’t you want children? I’m not entirely sure I follow all the connections but the questions insert themselves into my head and I ask myself: Do I want children? Am I missing something by not being a mother? Most friends I talked to actively want this, she wants to feel life growing within her, she wants to “give” birth, she wants to be pregnant, to hold the child within her, to be able to give love unconditionally, to have someone to look after her (and her partner) in the future, to experience the joy of motherhood. I feel none of these things. Does that mean I am a cold fish? That I have no feelings? Am I fooling myself when I say I feel no active desire to have children—am I saying this because, in truth, I want them, but I do not want to seem lacking in any way so I imagine I don’t? It’s difficult to say. I’m constantly suspicious of myself though and worry: am I really the contented person I think I am or am I just pretending?

My friend’s statement stays with me. It comes back to haunt me time and again. Am I such a natural? Then why is the desire for motherhood not growing inside me actively?

I think back to my friends who talk about being able to love unconditionally. I think, well, this is not something I am unfamiliar with—why do people assume such feelings then are only meant for children? My friends have children, talk of sleepless nights, of irresponsible husbands, unhelpful siblings, of school admissions, of careers given up, of grades and universities: I hear this all the time. And I hear the throwaway remark: “Well, how would you know? You’ve never been a mother.”

I’ve just got my first job. It’s in a publishing house: my father goes to the general manager, a genial Bengali, and tells him that he had better look after his daughter. The general manager tells me this is the first time they have employed a woman in an executive position: normally they do not like to do this because women go off and get married and have children. He makes it sound like a crime. I promise him I will not do this. I keep my promise. Long after I leave my job. No marriage, no children.

My mother and I are talking. I worry for you, she tells me, what will you do when you grow old? Everyone needs someone. If you don't want to marry, why don't you just adopt a child? But is that a good reason for adopting a child, I ask her, to have someone around when you grow old? And what's the guarantee anyway? No, no, she quickly switches tack. That's not why I think you should adopt. But just think what wonderful grandparents this potential child is missing out on! Good enough reason for adopting, don't you think? I take her seriously. Perhaps she knows more than I do, I tell myself, and I start to search out adoption possibilities. For a while, I am quite excited by the change in my life that this promises, but in the end, I do not have the courage, or the motivation. I give up.

I've set up my own publishing house, publishing books by and about women. I am fiercely passionate about this, it's what gives me joy, it's what involves me, I know this is what I want to do all my life. I want somehow to make a dent in the way the world sees women, to be part of that change. Is this madness, this obsession? Why didn't I feel this way about children? Or am I just deflecting an unfulfilled desire? I'm told motherhood is a woman's destiny, it's what completes her. So what's all this about publishing? But I don't feel incomplete, or that I have missed my destiny. Is there something wrong with me?

My friend Judith has been trying to have a child for many years. She's deeply depressed, the relationship with her husband is becoming more and more tense. She's gone through many miscarriages, they're both desperate for children, but they can't seem to have them. She and I talk one day, standing in the dark near a lamp post in a cold European town. Why don't you adopt, I ask her? How can I, she says, I'm not at all sure how I will feel towards the child if she is not mine. But she will be yours, I assure her. She may not be born of your body but she will be yours. We talk. I am passionate about the joys of adoption, the importance of it, the fact that "naturalness" means nothing in motherhood. Once home in India, I write her a long letter, persuasive, eloquent. She tells me that went a long way in making her decide. Today she has two lovely daughters, sisters, adopted from the same country, and she's a bestselling author of a book on motherhood. Why was I so persuasive? I don't really know.

I'm with my friend Mona Ahmed, a hijra, at her home in Delhi's Mehendiyan, an area with two mosques, a madrassa, two graveyards, a dhobi ghat and many houses. A man till the age of eighteen, and then castrated and now a woman after a sex-change operation, Mona tells me that she has always, always wanted to be a mother. I wanted to hold a child in my arms, to feel life against me, to learn motherhood, to bring the child up, she says. In her early seventies now, Mona fulfilled the desire to adopt a little over twenty years ago when a neighbour died in childbirth and her husband had no use for the daughter she had given birth to. Mona "created" a family, herself as abbu, father, her hijra friend Neelam as ammi, mother, her guru Chaman as dadi, grandmother. The assigned roles though were a bit more mixed up. It was Mona who was the real mother; she was the one who nurtured Ayesha, gave her a name, a birth date, an identity. I chose the 26th of January as her birth date, she said, for I wanted that she be free like India. And I learnt how to be a mother, she adds, I went every day to the doctor, the pediatrician, and asked her to teach me how to

feed the child, how to burp her, how to bathe, change, what to watch out for, how to develop antennae about when to wake up, and so on. Can motherhood then be learnt? Is this what there is to it? What about the “naturalness” of it to women? What about someone like Mona—abbu, father, but actually mother.

Mona’s daughter, Ayesha, comes to visit me. We talk about her life, a young girl, brought up in a hijra household, the father (Mona) actually her mother, the grandmother (Chaman) referred to as “he” by everyone but Dadi, grandmother, to Ayesha. Can you imagine what it was like? she asks me. They gave me so much love, but a young girl growing up, she needs some things, she has questions to ask about her self, her body, who was I to ask? There was no other female, only these men/women, these people of indeterminate sexuality. I was so alone. Perhaps motherhood can’t be learnt after all.

On a Thursday morning Bina, the daughter of the presswallah across the road, runs away. No one suspects anything till it’s afternoon. She’d gone to school to sit for an examination, perhaps she’s gone out with friends afterwards. But Bina is a “good” girl, she does not go off without informing her parents, so as afternoon turns to evening they start to worry. Back at home in their community, they wonder whether to go to the police. They are afraid of scandal—suppose it is something innocent, the girl’s just gone off somewhere and fallen asleep, why make her disappearance public? But in the evening, they learn that a young boy, the son of a neighbour, is also missing. Suspicion begins to solidify into certainty. In the end, a report is filed. Two, three days later, both are discovered in a neighbouring town, and brought back home. They swear that they wandered away innocently—went for a walk to the zoo, then a film, then, frightened that the parents would be angry, they boarded a bus and went off to a relative’s house. Did you sleep with each other, the anxious parents ask in euphemisms, there is no straight way to ask youngsters if they have had sex, no real vocabulary. No, no is the vehement denial. The parents are relieved: they don’t stop to ask how the youngsters so quickly understand what it is they are asking.

A month later Bina is pregnant. Her mother and I take her to a nearby clinic. We try to tell the doctor that it was an accident, but Bina is quicker than us. No, she says, it wasn’t my first time with this man. We’re silent. Clearly she lied to her mother and to me. Her mother is devastated: I did so much for her, and this is how she pays me back? I understand her grief, but I wonder too—all that stuff about unconditional love, where did this notion of payback enter the picture? How do children pay back? Bina has her abortion, and remains persona non grata. The young man disappears from her life, and soon after marries someone else. Men’s peccadillos are easily tolerated.

Two years later, she runs away again. This time with a married man. His wife is unable to give him children, so he marries Bina, brings her into the household. She gives him two children, he is delirious. She’s now married, and a mother. Her parents are relieved and happy. Everything is settled. She’s a mother. No one will say anything now—besides her husband also has money. Legitimacy and wealth—a powerful combination. Later, she will finance her young brother to buy a car and begin a taxi service.

My friend from overseas is visiting. We’re talking over dinner. It’s her son’s birthday, she does not know whether to call him or not, their relationship is difficult, tense. She’s no longer with his father, he resents

her because he feels she does not give him enough time or attention, she worries that he has not yet found a job. She calls him. Happy birthday son, she says. They talk, with affection, and then, suddenly, without warning, there is anger, resentment, almost a kind of hatred. I knew it, he says, you always do this, you always want to make me feel small. She tries to explain, he will not listen, she's devastated, but struggles to keep the conversation open. It ends badly. Am I a bad mother? she asks me. Is it wrong of me to want a career? I have done what I could for him, I love him, but surely it is time he took his life in his hands? What do you think I should do? I have no answer.

I'm at home. My mother, ninety years old, is unwell. She's becoming weaker by the day, she's unable to eat, she has to be helped to the bathroom. One day, as I take her to the bathroom and help to clean her up, she asks me, how will I ever repay you for this? And I ask myself, and her, why should she even think this way? She's spent the better part of her life being a mother not to one but four children, surely we owe her something? That old payback thing again. As she gets weaker, I find myself structuring my life around her needs: leaving the office to come home for lunch so she is not alone, putting her to bed in the evenings, staying with her, her hand in mine, till she is peacefully asleep, bathing her, cleaning her, feeding her, taking her for a walk, spending time with her... in other words, being a mother to her. One of my friends comments on this, you've become the mother. My women friends and I discuss this, we find that all of us are in similar situations, mothers to our mothers, becoming our mothers. Was this what was meant by it being natural?

We're trying to fix a meeting for an NGO that I am on the board of. There are six of us who need to meet and we're juggling dates. One of us, a man, says a weekend is better for him as his young son is getting married and he will not be free earlier. The other one announces that she is about to become a grandmother, and suddenly people start trading stories about being mothers and grandmothers, offering each other stories of how wonderful it all is. I pitch in saying I don't know about any of this, and am told, don't worry, we'll make you an honorary grandma, no worries if you don't have children. How true, I think, I have no worries of that kind. I will never have to worry about which school to send my child to, or be forced to think of her percentages when it comes to entering college. Or deal with the deeper anxieties that all mothers must have to deal with.

But relief isn't all. There's also concern. I've just seen a friend totally devastated at losing her young son. Barely twenty, he died in a freak accident, she is inconsolable, she feels a part of her has been torn away, wrenched out of her body almost. This too is part of motherhood, this deep, intense attachment, this terrible, devastating despair when you lose a child. Could I have coped with this had it happened to me? Useless to speculate, but a sort of fear settles around my heart for all the mothers who lose children—surely, I think, there can be no loss worse than this. There's relief too, perhaps a selfish sort of relief, at being childless.

But there's also concern, a question. For years I have identified myself as a single woman. It's important to me this definition: singleness is, for me, a positive state, one that is not defined by a lack, by something

missing, by a negative—as for example the word “unmarried” is. But with this children business, we don’t even have the language to define a positive state. I mean, there is childlessness and there is childlessness. How often have we heard that a couple is childless, that a woman who cannot bear a child is defined as barren. Why should this be? I did not make a choice not to have children, but that’s how my life panned out. I don’t feel a sense of loss at this, my life has been fulfilling in so many other ways. Why should I have to define it in terms of a lack? Am I a barren woman? I can’t square this with what I know of myself.

I recall one of the authors we’ve published, a domestic worker called Baby Halder. She had her first child when she was barely thirteen. A child herself, she became a mother before she had time to even think. At some point, Baby, reflecting on her childhood, commented on how ephemeral, how brief it was. One afternoon, exhausted from playing host to her sister’s suitors, Baby slumped against the wall of her home and reflected on her life. So brief was her childhood that she saw the entire history pass before her in a few moments. I licked every moment, she said, as her cow licks her calf, treasuring it. For so many of our young girls, despite laws that forbid it, motherhood comes even before they have stopped being children. Is this right? Why is this thing so valorized?

Nothing is simple though. The newspapers have been full of the story of a Bengali couple in Norway—the Norwegian authorities have taken their two children away from them. If reports are to be believed, one of the children has something called “attachment disorder”—he starts banging his head against the wall when he sees his mother. The papers speak of a tense, conflicted, sometimes violent relationship between the mother and the child. Finally, the mother is deemed unfit to look after the children, and they are handed over to their uncle. Back at home in India, the whole thing acquires other dimensions altogether—politics and nationalism enter the picture. The issue seems to be how Norway can decide on what is right and what is not for our children. In Bengal, the Child Rights Committee decides to give custody back to the mother. None of the reports in the papers says anything about whether the mother is competent to look after the children or not, or indeed how the children are being affected by this constant backing and forthing.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of this case, what concerns me is a different thing. On a membership-based email network called *feministsindia*, there is a general sense of relief that custody has been awarded to the mother. There seems to be an assumption that the mother is the “natural” (back to that natural stuff again) guardian, the best person to look after the children. It’s not the rights and wrongs of this particular case that worry me—my knowledge of them is, after all, only based on newspaper reports.

What concerns me is this: as feminists, we’ve questioned everything about the “naturalness” of motherhood but here we are, in a way almost unquestioningly accepting that naturalness, not even entertaining the notion that mothers can be violent, that they can be incapable of looking after their children, or even unwilling to do so. I wonder what is going on here—was the response of the Norwegian authorities a culturally insensitive one? Or was it that they believed, as often happens, only the father’s version? Were all media reports of the mother’s supposed violence towards her children then totally wrong? Or are we, as feminists, reaffirming the motherhood myth? Where does the truth lie? Is the relationship between a mother and a child always a wonderful one? I have no answer to these questions.

So what do we have in the end? The “naturalness” of motherhood? The “curse” of childlessness? The dread of barrenness? A life filled with lack, with loss of what might have been? Or just another way of living? A choice, happenstance, circumstance, call it what you like, but for me, it’s a happy, contented, fulfilled life, despite—or perhaps because of—being what is called “childless.” For those of you who’ve doubted yourself about this, let me assure you, it’s a good place to be.