

Just Love: Feminism, Faith, and Intimate Violence

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*How many loved your moments of glad grace
And loved your beauty with love false or true
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you
And loved the sorrows of your changing face*

'When You Are Old,'
William Butler Yeats

Moonlight and music, sunshine and song, playfulness and pleasure; love is the very essence of intimate life. But what about the troubled shades of love, the bits that are less than luminous, that play out as seduction, as deception, as narcissism, as cruel satiety, as violence, as rape? Love, which bequeaths life, can also bestow unimaginable injustice - and in some instances, even death. Yes, Roland Barthes' love, a "marked and wounded space", often hides very real wounds.

Of all the cases I examined on rape and suicide as part of my doctoral dissertation, the most painful were the suicide notes that spoke not of love's joys but of love's wounds, where intimate partner violence resulted in suicide, where God was invoked as the court of last resort. One such case was of a young woman raped by one of her own, a cousin. Detailing her ordeal of blackmail and gang rape, her suicide note invoked religious metaphor; her soul would not rest in peace if those responsible for her death went unpunished, it said.¹ In a second case, another young woman committed suicide after she was picked up, brutally beaten and gang-raped by a group of five men which included the man she had been in love with, and left in a semi-conscious state, according to an investigative report by India's National Commission for Women.² She was found afterwards by

¹ Bosco Dominique, "Blackmail, Rape by Cousin Drives TN Woman to Suicide," *The Times of India*, July 25, 2012.

² "Alleged Gangrape and Suicide of a Rape Victim in Ahmedabad," *Investigative Report*, National Commission for Women, New Delhi, Jan 2005, pp. 3-9.

her sister, who took her to the nearest police station where they faced much apathy and insensitivity. In the weeks that followed, lack of Inter-State Police cooperation hampered the speedy conduct of investigation while the accused kept openly sending threatening and mocking SMS messages to the rape victim in Hindi such as “*tujhe jo karna hai kar le, mera to baal bhi banka nahin hoga.*”³ In an extremely irresponsible move, a television news channel broadcast the details of the case based on their own supposed ‘investigation.’ The NCW report speaks of how the news-channel, in a 45-minute report, traced all the phone calls made by the woman in the last 8-9 months, the story line being that she contacted many men frequently, thus leading the viewers to raise questions about her conduct and character. Condemning the manner in which the program used victim-blaming strategies to discredit a rape victim, the NCW report questioned whether, “at a time when the investigation was progressing and one of the accused was still at large, was it ethical or wise to air a program like that?” Bijal finally committed suicide, asking in her suicide note for the guilty to be punished “especially Sajal, as I loved him.”

In the first case of suicide, God become a space of hope, holding out the promise of definite punishment for a “sin,” the language of believers, where secular courts could (or not) be depended upon to award definite punishment for a “crime” in the language of law. In the second case, God is absent altogether in the victim’s narrative of violence and plea for justice; there is only love, the love that ultimately took her life.

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Reading these and other cases, one may be reminded of the Draupadi *vastraharan* (disrobing) episode from the epic *Mahabharata*, where Draupadi, the wife of the Pandava brothers who bet and lose not only their kingdom but also their ‘beloved’ wife to the Kauravas in a game of *chausar* (dice), is physically dragged by her long hair into King Dhritarashtra’s court by Dushasana, one of the Kaurava brothers, who proceeds to disrobe her in full public view. Failed by the men she has loved and respected, Draupadi starts praying to the Hindu god Krishna and he steps in, lovingly, with his magic. As Dushasana pulls at Draupadi’s garment, there is more and more of it until the entire hall is filled with endless rolls of cloth and Draupadi remains as clothed as before; Dushasana is forced to give up his enterprise, and the woman’s right to bodily integrity is thus preserved, her

³ Translation: You can do whatever you want, but even the hair on my head will remain untouched.

body remaining elusive to the male public gaze through what Gayatri Spivak describes as the 'Idea of Sustaining Law (dharma), which materializes itself as clothing.'⁴

In her short story 'Dopdi,' acclaimed Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi offers a powerful feminist reworking of this episode.⁵ In Devi's story, Dopdi – a tribalized version of the Sanskrit name Draupadi – is a Santhali tribal woman. Her husband Dulna Majhi, a comrade in the revolutionary Naxalite movement, is killed by the army, who also capture Dopdi, stripping and gang-raping her in custody. No male love, whether divine or human, comes to save her – my point here being not to endorse extreme left politics and its violence, but to condemn custodial rape. When Dopdi is taken to the chief commander the next morning, wounded and brutalized, she refuses the cloth offered to her to cover her 'shame.' "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? [...] There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do?" (p. 196) Thus, she refuses to play into the patriarchal politics of shaming rape victims; her body may have been brutalized, but her spirit – and in the context of this essay, even if not Mahasweta's own story, might we say her soul – remains unvanquished on the level of the plot. Importantly, the classical Draupadi is *also* a powerful female figure in Hindu mythology, because she does not accept her fate meekly at any point but questions, with anger and pride, society's objectification of her as a woman.⁶ Hence Spivak, in *In Other Worlds*, is correct to assert that it would be a mistake to see the modern story as a refutation of the ancient one, as Dopdi is as heroic as Draupadi; however, Dopdi is also what Draupadi could not be, insofar as the latter was "written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male power [...] Dopdi is at once a palimpsest and a contradiction." (p. 252) The classical Draupadi's 'chastity' is conveniently protected in the name of *dharma* by a 'good man,' in this case the god Krishna, even though it was in the name of the same *dharma* that her polyandrous marriage to five brothers was earlier socially legitimized, despite her own wishes to the contrary, since she only loved Arjun. As Spivak notes, "In the epic, Draupadi's legitimized pluralization (as a wife among husbands) in singularity (as a possible mother or harlot) is thus used

⁴ Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 252.

⁵ Mahasweta Devi, 'Draupadi', in Agnigarbha (Womb of Fire), trans. Gayatri Spivak, 'Draupadi,' in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, pp. 187-96.

⁶ For instance, when Draupadi is summoned into court, she sends the messenger back with a query: Did Yudhisthir pledge her before or after he had lost himself in the game of dice, because the latter would mean that having lost himself, he no longer had any supposed ownership over, or right to, lose her. When she is subsequently dragged into court, she again does not accept it with resignation, and demonstrates anger and scorn at the inability of all the powerful men to stand up against the injustice unfolding before their eyes.

to demonstrate male glory. She provides the occasion for a violent transaction between men, the efficient cause of the crucial battle.” (pp. 251-252)

Indeed we could argue, as others such as Wendy Doniger have, that *dharma* is a gendered concept, certain theoretical injunctions to the contrary notwithstanding⁷ i.e. what was *adharmā* for a woman was never *adharmā* to the same extent for a man, with greater morality and penalty attached to a woman’s ‘sins,’ an equation further complicated by caste inequalities. However, rather than reading sexual double standards as a particular limitation of Hindu thought – especially since the latter does not envisage God only as male, and also accords pride of place to the female divine – it is more accurate to understand this as a limitation of religions in general (and indeed, of non-religious, ‘secular’ spaces too, as I shall argue later.) As Fatmagul Bektay says even of monotheistic religions, religion has been one of the most effective ideological and institutional means for controlling women’s bodies.⁸ Since images of religious origin have mostly been constructed by men, it becomes difficult for women to “name and define themselves,” and thus “when women embark on the path to self-definition and self-determination, they inevitably will have to deal with and eventually get rid of the image of ‘Cursed Eve’ or ‘Woman as Source of Fitna’... Achieving this requires a coming to terms with the all-pervasive gender stereotyping of monotheistic religions.” (p.3) In other words, the intertwined notions of chastity, self-sacrifice and shame that many theorists such as Sudhir Kakar⁹ have seen as emblematic of female identity in Hindu thought, and the latter’s intertwining of “mythic Goddess, epic heroine and mortal woman,”¹⁰ is also fairly emblematic of all faiths, their own specificities notwithstanding.

Hegemonic cultural iconography has traditionally understood the raped female body as unchaste, ritually impure and irreversibly shamed. This is why Indian feminists have tried to show the link between shame and sexual violence, and how a woman’s experience of shame is a form of patriarchal control; a man can violate a woman’s body and, such being the power of shame, then throw the blame back on her.¹¹ The accommodative indirections of fiction that allow Dopdi’s

⁷ See for instance Wendy Doniger, “Betting on Margin: Adultery and Surrogate Pseudomarrriage in Hinduism,” in *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion, and Culture*. Eds. Lindsay Harlan and Paul B. Courtright. New York: Oxford UP, 1995. 160-83.

⁸ Fatmagul Bektay, *Women and Religion* (Montreal: Black Rose, 1998.)

⁹ Sudhir Kakar, “Feminine Identity in India,” in *Women in Indian Society: A Reader*, ed., Rehana Ghadially (New Delhi: Sage, 1988).

¹⁰ Sandra Robinson, “Hindu Paradigms of Women: Images and Values,” in *Women, Religion and Social Change*, eds. Yvonne Haddad and Ellison Findly (Hartford: SUNY Press, 1985).

¹¹ Meenakshi Thapan, “Gender and Embodiment in Everyday Life,” in *Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity*, ed. Meenakshi Thapan (Delhi; Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 25.

powerful agency, and her “choice” not to cover oneself with a cloth given by those who see sexual violence as shameful for the victim rather than the perpetrator, are not as available in real life, and become even more challenging in the case of intimate partner violence, which is still treated with secrecy and disbelief. In the case discussed earlier, the young woman committed suicide following gang-rape by her boyfriend and his friends, who then assassinated *her* character and shamed her. She had just loved, yet “love” had not been just to her. The burden of shame became too much to bear, and justice was sought on a higher plane through the ending of life itself.

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Yet try as I might, I could not see the usual antagonistic positing of feminism against religious faith – even *all* faiths – as the solution, whether in terms of scholarship or the varied complexities of lived experience. The reasons for this are many.

Firstly, unlike scholars on the far left of the political spectrum who believe that a study of religion does not constitute serious scholarship, I have always been drawn to more nuanced historical, theological, philosophical and philological engagements with the question of religion. Think of the German idealists like Hegel and the metaphysics of Absolute Spirit, Benjamin's messianism, Ralph Waldo Emerson's romanticism, Berkeley's immaterialism, Heidegger's religious atheism, Rene Descartes, Carl Jung, even Newton...the list is long. Another common criticism is that a profession of religious faith runs contrary to liberal intent; but as I wrote earlier in a monthly column, it is not faith but fundamentalism that poses a threat to liberal democracy.¹² Religious texts are material and cultural products of their times, and it is the insistence on rigid, dogmatic and unchanging interpretations of religious texts and ideas that works to the detriment of collective justice. Otherwise, as American philosopher and constitutional law expert Ronald Dworkin had argued, religion interpreted in progressive ways can be quite compatible with liberal democracy. Today, it is to engage with precisely these kinds of knotty questions – from a theological point of view, as well as from that of the lived intersections of religion, polity and society, as it were – that top universities like Harvard, Yale, Stanford and Princeton have departments of religion or divinity schools to encourage research in this area. The work of Margaret Farley – a Catholic, theologian and feminist who taught at Stanford for several decades – serves as a brilliant example. Her award-

¹² Debotri Dhar, “Faith, in an Age of (Il)liberalism” *The Sunday Guardian*, April 12, 2014.

winning book *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*,¹³ condemned by the Vatican and ignored by some feminists even as it was embraced by others, does a fine job of integrating faith and feminism within a single framework in order to address important questions pertaining to sexuality and gender violence, among others. To this book, I shall shortly return.

Secondly, academic readings aside, feminist reinterpretations of mythology by writers as well as by cultural communities in general, not to mention female mystics, also provide fascinating insights into complex processes of continuity and change, the many visions and revisions. Speaking of literary re-engagements with Hindu mythology, Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' mentioned earlier is only one in a sea of creative efforts and in a multitude of languages, others including Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Palace of Winds*, Anita Nair's *Mistress*, and Namita Gokhale and Malashi Lal's edited collection *In Search of Sita*. And as far as community engagements are concerned, it could well be argued that a critique of patriarchy has always been an integral part of cultural traditions and lived religion where women have, through poetry, song, street theatre (*nukkad natak*) and even intimate conversations in home and kitchen, questioned patriarchal traditions. Indeed modern Bollywood films like *Lajja* and *Eklavya* which take on ancient mythological themes, and question violence against women and marginalized groups, could be seen as creative reinterpretations of, rather than a clean break with, tradition.

Thirdly, the "religious" versus "secular" distinction does not seem to hold quite as strongly in practice as is assumed in theory. In Indian vote-bank politics, for instance, the religious and the secular have often meant accommodating the demands of majority and minority religious groups respectively, to the detriment of women's rights. The 1985 Shah Bano case can be mentioned in this regard, where pressure from conservative Muslim groups led to the diluting of a progressive Supreme Court ruling in favor of alimony for a destitute woman divorced by her husband at age 62, and to much-needed amendments in Muslim Personal Law. Christine Keating had used the term 'postcolonial sexual contract' to describe the Indian constitution's approach to women's rights; drawing from the work of contract theorists such as Carole Pateman and Charles Mills, Keating demonstrated how the rhetoric of fraternity and brotherhood deployed by the assembly leadership emphasized the equality of women in the public sphere, through fundamental rights, while subordinating them in the private sphere through the non-passage of the Uniform Civil Code.¹⁴

¹³ Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

¹⁴ Christine Keating, "Framing the Postcolonial Sexual Contract: Democracy, Fraternalism, and State Authority in India," *Hypatia* vol. 22, no. 4 (Fall 2007), 130-145.

Here it may be worth mentioning that the framers of the Indian Constitution had interpreted secularism as equality of all faiths – in Indic terms, *dharma sapekshata* – as opposed to the Western definition of secularism as a separation of church and state, or *dharma nirpekshata*, which has been considered a necessary backbone of Western liberal democracy. In my aforementioned column, I had quoted a senior American scholar describing South Asia as not having been able to effect this separation (between church and state) and therefore being “hopelessly mired in religion.” While there is obvious truth in this allegation - one thinks of fatwas, extra-judicial rulings of khap panchayats, and religious riots across South Asian countries, India's own worst riots having been in 1984, 1992-93 and 2002 - to deduce that only certain parts of the world are mired in religion would be facetious. As Bektay says, “Dominant images and stereotypes continue to exist even after social change has achieved palpable aims, because they have penetrated the deepest nooks and crannies of our consciousness.” (p. 3) Faith seeps into the everyday life of citizens in complex ways, including those who may not consciously identify as religious, as it does in the everyday lives of nations. Thus I noted in my column that “the affirmation of Christian values in the American public sphere is hard to miss, as is the Islamophobia following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the ways in which religion continues to dictate pro-life and other legislation.” It goes without saying that such legislation can have tremendous impact upon lives and choices, with or without domestic and intimate partner violence, and even more so for poorer women.

That both liberal Western and Indic understandings of secularism leave largely unaddressed how reforms *within* faith are to be carried out is pertinent. As a result, not just recent Supreme Court directives in America and India - for instance, legalizing gay marriage in the former, and removing barriers to women's entry in a temple like Sabarimala in the latter - have met with resentment from some members of Christian and Hindu groups respectively. Intriguingly, some Left male intellectuals in India also critiqued the court ruling, arguing that feminist principles could not be applied to religion! Pointing at multiple such instances in India and America, including patriarchal pressures on women in Left-ruled Indian states and sexist attacks on Hillary Clinton by supporters of both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the United States, I have earlier referred to this phenomenon as a transnational politics of bromance, asking “Is this socialism or brocialism? And more broadly, a bromance between hetero-patriarchies across left, right and center, to exercise ownership over errant women of ‘their own’ class, caste, community, religion, nation—and dictate

agendas?"¹⁵ The point here is that, as in the case of the religious versus secular theoretical distinction, the left versus right ideological debate too seems over-simplistic when it comes to actual patriarchal control exercised over bodies, and the lived realities of gender violence.

Fourth, and on a related note, there is enough research to support the fact that gender violence (including intimate partner violence) can occur anywhere regardless of religious affiliation, social class, race, geographical location and many other markers of personal and social identity. Liz Kelley's work is particularly pertinent here in that it examines how a range of gendered behaviors – flashing, obscene phone calls, sexual harassment on the street, domestic violence, pressurized and coercive sex, and sexual assault – constitute a "continuum." As Kelley clarifies, sexual violence as a continuum does not operate in a linear line but as a series of aggressive behaviors, some of which (such as catcalling) are normalized in the everyday as "natural" male behavior. Her framework of analyzing experiences such as catcalling by strangers in the public alongside those such as pressurized sex between intimate partners in the private demonstrates how ubiquitous and widespread sexual violence can be. Read alongside recent research and statistics on the many dimensions of gender violence should drive the point home about the pervasiveness of sexual violence and sexual double standards across the globe, *regardless* of whether or not the populations and individuals studied identify as people of faith.

The high incidence of sexual violence in the United States, and date rapes and intimate partner violence on college campuses, also suggest that a higher degree of sexual permissiveness does not necessarily protect from sexual violence. Nor does it ensure legal justice in the aftermath of violence, as countless judicial rulings (including in the most recent Stanford rape, where a 20-year old former athlete who assaulted an unconscious woman has been sentenced to only six months in prison despite being proven guilty by the jury of three felony counts of sexual assault, and where the victim's character was assassinated during the trial.) In fact, the opposite happens in many cases, where teenagers engage in sexual acts under peer and/or partner pressure; however, with sexual double standards and entrenched social and legal inequalities remaining unchanged, such pressurized sex can lead to further exploitation of the already vulnerable. Indeed, teaching college students in the US for the past eight years, and listening to some of their painful experiences, has demonstrated to me the weaknesses of a liberal Western feminism that treats sexual freedom as *automatically* empowering.

¹⁵ Debotri Dhar, "Women and the Transnational Politics of Bromance," *The Sunday Guardian*, March 26, 2016.

Hence for those who argue that law is ultimately the proper instrument for dealing with issues of justice pertaining to sexual violence, I would counter-argue that a *fifth* reason for an engagement with the question of faith has to do precisely with the limitations of law, since patriarchal ideologies operating through the regulatory processes of law have often functioned to discipline female citizen-subjects.

Speaking of these limitations of law, a seminal work is Brenda Cossman and Ratna Kapur's work on the familial ideology; this ideology, they argue, has undergirded juridical approaches to gender issues in India.¹⁶ Citizenship becomes gendered, and replete with dichotomies such as good and bad, housewife and prostitute, normal and deviant.¹⁷ With specific reference to sexual violence, feminist sociologist Veena Das argues how judicial discourse in India has often been undergirded by an androcentric national imaginary that classifies rape victims as 'good, chaste women' or 'bad, unchaste women' in a manner that ultimately has less to do with protecting the bodily integrity of women and more to do with the regulation of sexuality according to the social rules of alliance.¹⁸ So, for instance, in the case of a young, unmarried girl and a stranger, it is a 'grievous' matter of a chaste, previously unmarked body now sexualized through the impress of male desire and rendered 'unmarriageable,' while in the case of women defined as 'sexually experienced,' rape is an offense against the rule of alliance (according to which, she is only supposed to be available to her husband), but if it can be proved that she is unchaste and without significance in the exchange between men, then she is seen as morally 'available' within the social rules of alliance. According to Das, the discursive production of legal 'knowledge' thus places the raped female body before the scrutiny of a masculinist state such that women's own experiences become unknowable. This paradox of law is also brought out by Nivedita Menon, who specific rape cases as examples to demonstrate how the binary logic of law, defined in terms of simplistic oppositions such as truth/untruth, guilt/innocence and consent/non-consent, cannot comprehend the complexity of sexual violence.¹⁹ As a consequence, and despite significant strides in law, legal discourse on sexual

¹⁶ Brenda Cossman and Ratna Kapur, "Women, Familial Ideology and the Constitution: Challenging Equality Rights," in *Feminist Terrains in Legal Domains: Interdisciplinary Essays on Women and Law in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996), pp. 61-99.

¹⁷ See also Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan, *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law and Citizenship in Postcolonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003).

¹⁸ Veena Das, "Sexual Violence, Discursive Formations, and the State," in *States of Violence* eds. Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), pp. 393-423.

¹⁹ Nivedita Menon, "Embodying the Self: Feminism, Sexual Violence and the Law," in *Translating Desire: The Politics of Gender and Culture in India*, ed., Brinda Bose (New Delhi: Katha, 2002), pp. 200-37.

violence often ends up re-enacting dominant patriarchal values, not to mention the additional legal hurdles to justice in sensitive areas such as marital rape.

Importantly, these limitations of law when it comes to issues of gender and sexual violence are not just an Indian or a 'Third World' problem. Feminist theorists in the West have also interrogated the limitations of liberal individualist discourse, whose tenet of procedural or formal legal equality gives rise to a model of equality through abstract individualism, often resulting in abstracting the very (gendered) conditions that make the individual unequal.²⁰ Those such as Carole Pateman, Drucilla Cornell and Margaret Thornton have demonstrated how, by not engaging the specificity, historicity and embodied politics of location and being inadequately attentive to women's experiences of violence and rape, the classical liberal Western body implicitly emerges as male.²¹ Drucilla Cornell, in particular, notes how what is called human is too often the genre of the male, while Carole Pateman argues that liberalism's notion of the 'individual' remains intact only so long as society's binary distinctions between the natural/civil, public/private and male/ female remain intact, and how liberalism's celebration of impartiality and 'objective' reason is structured upon a gendered relegation of emotion into the feminized private sphere.

Thus a foregrounding of sexual difference is only as problematic as its erasure, the former in essentializing gender and the latter in overlooking the real effects of gender to once again implicitly uphold the androcentric norm. This can be termed the "dilemma of difference," the risk of recreating or devolving difference by either over-emphasizing or ignoring it.²² Hence feminists working within the terrain of law are also engaged in "an intense battle questioning law as the principle, if not the only site for feminist interventions relating to gender justice."²³ So why not consider including faith, whatever be its own limitations, *as one more possible site of engagement?*

In other words, a fertile tradition of nuanced engagements, revisions and reinterpretations of faith – academic, philosophical, theological, literary, cultural and popular – along with the gaps between the left-right and religious-secular theoretical divides on one hand and the rich complexities of lived experience on the other, the global ubiquity of sexual violence, and the

²⁰ See Anne Phillips, *Which Equalities Matter* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1999).

²¹ See for instance Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988); Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York; Routledge, 1992); and Margaret Thornton ed., *Public and Private: Feminist Legal Debates* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995).

²² Martha Minnow, "Learning to Live with the Dilemma of Difference: Bilingual and Special Education." Quoted in Cossman and Kapur, "Women, Familial Ideology and the Constitution," p. 72.

²³ Taisha Abraham, ed., *Women and the Politics of Violence* (New Delhi: Shakti, 2002), p. 27.

limitations of both law and Western liberal theory, convinced me of the need to re-engage gender and sexual violence from the perspective(s) of faith. Perhaps this is all the more needed when it comes to love relationships and intimate partner violence, where personal beliefs play a larger role often outside the formal reach of law.

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From childhood, I have identified as a person of faith, even while recognizing that belief in the divine, or the universe, can be quite amorphous, holding different meanings for different individuals and communities at various points. However, it was my location and interdisciplinary work within United States academia for the past many years, as well as the rich experience of being associated with advocacy-based institutions such as Manavi in New Jersey and the Center for the Education of Women at the University of Michigan, that encouraged me to engage with the complex intersections of faith and feminism in ways that I might not have as an academic in India, at least in intellectual spaces where faith and feminism are still posited in an entirely antagonistic relationship. I learned as a doctoral candidate and instructor that in US universities (including public universities), students can be exempt from having to attend class on their designated religious holidays, and be allowed to do make-up work. Also, as mentioned earlier, several US universities have Religious Studies departments and Divinity Schools which employ theologians, an experience similar to my Masters experience at the University of Oxford, UK, which also housed a Divinity School and theology faculty. Right across our quirky house on Iffley road, in fact, was a theological seminary. Where location outside India has consciously shaped my academic interest in this area – only one among many areas of interest concerning gender and culture – my Hindu minority status may also have shaped it unconsciously. Rather than reject faith in-toto, these academic and cultural experiences provided an impetus to uncover and/or reinterpret positive, progressive ideas useful for gender justice and social change *within and across faiths*.

I thought, for instance, of Hindu ideas such as the wife, *ardhangini*, being an equal partner in marriage, which can be used creatively to combat domestic violence, especially as notions of equality change over time; and of the divine image of *ardhanarishwara*, half-man and half-woman, which can be used to counter discrimination and violence against transsexuals and those who do not identify according to the gender binary. I read of how texts such as the *Ratishashtra* and the *Kathasaritasagara* emphasize the woman's point of view. As I continued on these intellectual, political, personal and geographical journeys of exploration and creative interpretation, inter-faith

dialogues became an intrinsic part of my travel. One of these journeys – an academic appointment, but a journey nonetheless - took me to teach Women’s and Gender Studies at a small liberal arts college in Ohio. My office was adjacent to those of Religious Studies faculty members specializing in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism, who also identified as persons of faith, leading to many fascinating conversations on human religiosity and spiritual experience, and how these have shaped historical and contemporary politics, local and global histories, cultures, and society’s myriad understandings of gender and justice. I taught an interdisciplinary course on ‘Transnational Feminisms’ cross-listed with Religious Studies, and continued to widen my own horizons through robust inter-faith dialogues from both a theological and a feminist perspective.

Margaret Farley’s book *Just Love*, recommended by a pastor, feminist, and Professor of ethics, was among the most interesting books I read that year. Acknowledging that situations of the modern present are increasingly different from those of the past and pose an entirely different set of ethical challenges, Farley asks probing questions about love, sex, and morality in order to explore the possibility of developing an ethic that is useful for people’s sexual lives. “Are there really moral criteria that will apply to relationships of painfully unrequited love as well as to relationships where passion grows gracefully into mature and mutual love in a shared and settled life? Will ethical norms determine whether loves will find fulfillment? Whether unfulfilled loves will prove tragic, or simply sad, or fortunate losses along a better way? Are ethical principles and moral rules the solution to impossible loves, the roadmap to possible and beautiful relationships? Can ethical norms prevent our being harmed or our lives from being disrupted? Can moral rules help us to navigate the fragile ways of intimacy?” (p. 14)

Religious “morality”, of course, has many negative connotations too, whether historical, material, and/or theological. Hinduism is still haunted by the caste system, Christianity by colonialism and white supremacist discourses, Islam by Wahhabi or “jihadi” extremism; and while each of these formulations is an exercise in oversimplification, all faiths, including Buddhism, have also been haunted by patriarchy. Rather than reduce faith and its moral role in public and private understandings of relationships to some ideas or practices within organized religions, Farley’s framework of just love therefore emphasizes creative interpretation and cross-cultural dialogue. Importantly, it emphasizes *both* love and justice, making the latter a necessary requirement for the former. Thus she asks “With what kinds of motives, under what sorts of circumstances, in what forms of relationships, do we render our sexual selves to one another in ways that are good, true, right, and just?” (p. 207) While acknowledging the objections that may be raised against her framework – “too harsh a discipline for the spontaneity of love,” “heavy-handed socially

constructed norms to shape and to control personal relations, to the advantage of some but perhaps the detriment of all” and so forth – Farley nevertheless argues that the undermining of love “is not a necessary consequence of a ‘law’ of justice. Like W H. Auden we might demur: ‘Law is the one all gardeners observe.... Law is the wisdom of the old, the impotent grandfathers shrilly scold... Law, says the priest with a priestly look ... is the words in my priestly book. ... Law, says the judge ... is The Law....’ The law of justice need carry none of these meanings, however.” (p. 208) Emphasizing love rather than (only) law, Farley’s framework posits principles and requirements such as *consent, mutuality, equality, commitment, and fruitfulness*.

While a detailed discussion of each of her principles and their practical application to a very wide range of contemporary and cross-cultural scenarios is beyond the scope of this essay, these principles do at least offer a starting point for discussion and interpretation for reimagining a love rooted in ethical interpretations of faith that believe, above all, in *doing good*, and *doing no harm*. Consent, for instance, must become a non-negotiable principle regardless of context; while understandings of morality may be individual, societal and subjective, the principle of consent must be objective. Bodily integrity is an inviolable aspect of personhood, and unwilling partners may not be coerced or pressurized to engage in sexual acts against their will. Similarly, when it comes to mutuality and equality, Farley proposes a relational rather than only libidinal understanding of sex. As she says, “traditional interpretations of heterosexual sex are steeped in images of the male as active and the female passive, the woman as receptacle and the man as fulfiller, the woman as ground and the man as seed. No other interpretation of the polarity between the sexes has had so long and deep-seated an influence on men’s and women’s self-understandings. Today we think such descriptions quaint or appalling, and we recognize the danger in them.” (p. 221) Of course the principle of ‘fruitfulness’ seems tied to orthodox ideas of sex only for reproduction, while yet others such as commitment may be very context-specific and not as applicable to all relationships or lifestyles, as my millennial students at the University of Michigan rightly pointed out. That said, the class agreed that communication and honesty are important in order for even shorter-term consensual relationships to remain just and not exploitative. In fact, as several high profile cases in India as well as globally in the recent years have shown, it is precisely an absence of honesty and communication against a backdrop of changing mores that led to destructive and exploitative relationships, unrealistic expectations, even forced abortions, and suicide.

Do good. Do no harm. Deceptively simple caveats, and yet filled with infinite wisdom. How would our personal and collective understandings of intimate partner violence change if we made these caveats the cornerstone of our relationships? Marital rape (the grievousness of whose

violence has, till now, not been recognized by many legal systems worldwide), sexual demands that violate personal boundaries and a sense of individual wholeness even between seemingly consenting adults, relationships with tremendous power imbalance that render them extremely problematic (such as between teacher and student, boss and employee), irrational superstitions and taboos, consenting gay associations, especially in contexts where homosexuality is still considered “unnatural” and a legal offence (for e.g. Section 377, a colonial law in the Indian Penal Code, still criminalizes homosexuality)²⁴...the list goes on. Whether we speak in terms of historical or contemporary realities, an interpretive framework of love-as-justice can be useful not just for people of faith, in that it no longer excludes an integral part of their identities, but also allow for open dialogue within and across societies.

In other words, the pitfalls of considering feminism and faith within the same frame notwithstanding, the genuine transformative possibilities are at least as many, especially where it comes to justice within intimate relationships. In love, difficult decisions of holding on and letting go are often undergirded by faith and forgiveness. Love, like law, is transformative; yet the sterner ‘law’ hardly invokes as much positive sentiment as the word ‘love,’ across political and personal divides. Farley astutely says: “Lovers shyly propose that the law is ‘Like love I say.... Like love we can't compel or fly, Like love we often weep, Like love we seldom keep.’” (p. 208) Not all of love can be systematized, squeezed into rigid categories of law, or life; nor is love always a meeting of Yeats’ “pilgrim souls” for everyone. But of this we can be certain - if it is not just, it is just not love.

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²⁴ Debates on homosexuality have a long and complicated history in India, with decriminalization being followed by re-criminalization. At the time of writing this essay, a five-judge Supreme Court bench had agreed to hear in an open court the curative plea of LGBT+ rights NGO Naz Foundation and many gay rights activists. In June 2016, several Indian LGBT celebrities have filed a fresh petition to challenge Section 377.