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COMMENTARY

Locating a shadowy state in queer, feminist politics

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Summary

In this commentary, part of a book forum on Srila Roy's (2022) book *Changing the Subject: Feminist and Queer Politics in Neoliberal India*, I argue that the feminist and queer movement, in response to the neoliberal turn in India, is not totally separate from the Indian state formations. In fact, a shadowy state emerges in the affective life of citizens as an expression of what Timothy Mitchell would have called “state effect.”

KEYWORDS

Changing the Subject, feminist and queer movement, India, neoliberalism, the state

QUEER, FEMINIST GOVERNMENTALITY

Srila Roy's recent book *Changing the Subject: Feminist and Queer Politics in Neoliberal India* is a significant addition to the long strand of scholarship on the shadows of states on private and intimate processes of subject formation. To do this, she conducts ethnography with two organizations—Sappho and Janam—across a decade in Calcutta in eastern India. Sappho was a safe space for queer persons to come out, talk to each other, and seek support. Janam is a more typical developmental NGO focused on women's rights.

The book shows the makings of a feminist subject under diverse and changing conditions made possible by neoliberalism in India. In my review essay, I wish to excavate the shadowy state, present through its absence, in Roy's account of the growth and change in feminist subjectivity in Calcutta. The feminist subject bobs up and down in the currents of waters flowing through the state and the economy to sometimes be a “classic,” autonomous subject critiquing processes of power and, at other times, being co-opted by those same forces. Roy writes: “This book locates itself in this struggle between being autonomous and being co-opted” (3). Roy shows the production of the feminist self under conditions of change in “activist governance,” which were, in turn, triggered by large-scale economic changes in India and beyond (5). Crucially, Roy avoids any easy binary between an elite and a subaltern feminist.

While Roy uses the term “queer feminist governmentality,” I ask if the state, in very tangible, holistic forms (not just in insinuation through the processes of governmentalization), is present in Roy's ethnographic accounts. The personal cultivation of a certain kind of self lies front and center in Roy's story, as queer activists and development practitioners choose certain methods and practices for fashioning their

politics which in turn gets folded into a self-making project. Roy powerfully asserts: “The relationship that one had to oneself, however free and empowering, was ultimately rooted in, and even reliant upon, a wider field and force of government” (11). Knowing that Roy steers clear of equating typical “state apparatuses” as authors of such “field and force of government,” I wish to diagnose the actual presence of the state and its apparatuses in the lives of these queer, feminist subjects.

Roy interrogates the stereotypical understanding of the “aspirational and promissory” self that appears to be the register through which queer, feminist subjects in post-liberalization India participate in the personal-political journey of production of the feminist self (10). The standards of aspiration are often mimetic for the relatively elite feminists (urban, educated, and so on) in the Global South, while the less privileged (often) rural, working-class subjects emerge as passive receivers of the feminism package that is handed to them through NGOs and other such vehicles. Roy shows how localized strategies and practices shape the practice of feminism in her fieldsites.

WHITHER STATE?

Let me zoom out from Roy's book and look at the role of the Indian state in shaping Indian neoliberalism. Akhil Gupta and Kalyanakrishnan Sivaramakrishnan (2011) have written provocatively about the nature of the Indian state, saying that it did not roll back at all from the lives of its subjects in the wake of liberalization, which would have been the general expectation. Its increased presence in government-funded welfare programs and at lower levels of state visibility features in their study of the changing character of the Indian state. Partha Chatterjee (2008) writes, on the heels of the Nandigram and Singur land acquisition struggles and associated state-sponsored violence, about the rise of non-corporate capital, the growth of the informal sector, and the changing character of the land question in rural India. Associated with these were changing tones of legal jargon such as “public purpose” used by state, corporate actors, and activists alike to negotiate the stiff fight over the designation of new purposes for agrarian land. Given that it is located in West Bengal, Srila Roy's book must be studied in the context of this scholarship on the changing character of what Timothy Mitchell would have called “state effect” in India since the early 1990s (Mitchell 1999). One might even weave together in this scholastic cluster a comment about the scramble for land and associated patterns of dispossession in Michael Levien's (2018) work showing a post-liberalization (post-2010) version of the resource and land question in India. The rise of a canny, economic subject is seen at this time in sectors like call centers (Mankekar and Gupta 2019) and microfinance (Kar 2020) or registers of everyday innovation at the edges of legality (Ghosh 2019). This subject can weave a clever and sometimes progressive self, using rights language and pegging their biography to broader canvases of social justice. In the routine meting out of “good politics,” social justice becomes a mundane practice and technique of the self.

SEX AS PEDAGOGY

So, what does all this commentary on Indian political economy have to do with Srila Roy's demonstration of the changing nature of the queer, feminist subject in Calcutta and its rural surround? This existing scholarly commentary, I argue, provides a necessary percussive background to which this intimate staging of the sexual self is taking place. Older Sappho members' (Sappho had later turned into Sappho for Equality, a more professional NGO) concerns about the changing economic life of its members and allies are to be noted, not only as a comment on the change in the self-fashioning of the queer self but significantly in the making of a citizenry of economic supermodernity. Sappho goes from being an intimate support space for persons who desire queer sociality, turns into a bit of a non-place – a place with generic characteristics emerging from the social justice grammar, but losing its specificity as narrated by its older members (on the concept of non-place, see Auge 2008). There are Facebook groups, cafes, and film festivals now to stage this kind of queer sociality. The urban social cost of such queer sociality

is also lower than it used to be, although the risks of being found out by one's native family and so on continue to exist.

I wish to locate the two organizations Roy researched—Sappho and Janam—and the lives that they harbor in the specificity of Kolkata, which was, until the historic elections of 2011, a hub of regional communist politics sustained by the provincial government of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its left allies. The millennium turned in West Bengal, with a strong struggle over the role of the agrarian subject (who could no longer be called a peasant) in the domain of mainstream politics and the communist state's desperate and a bit delayed attempt to jump onto the neoliberal economic agenda-setting bandwagon. I read Roy's accounts of platforms like Sappho and Janam in coining the terms of a new feminist politics in this background. Not to say that they are directly connected, but an air, I argue, was already present in Calcutta and its surround about the need for and anxiety about one's delayed response to neoliberalism which had already come in and swung around cities like Mumbai and Bangalore. Like the demand for new forms of work within this changing economic context, I see the debates among Roy's various characters—about clothes of another gender, haircuts, occupation of public spaces, staying home or moving out—as illustrative of a struggle to inhabit an elusive, temporal fraction that is the present time. A “nowtime”—that which must be experienced as urgent and immediate and will put the subject onto the map of things relevant at *this moment*. In many ways, these sexual subjects teach and learn sex in new ways—while learning and teaching new ways of being an economically canny subject. Sex becomes a subject of teaching and learning, fundamentally, in which the reified *graamer meye* (village girl) emerges a mute receiver of governmental and sexual pedagogy (75). NGO workers from the city (Kolkata) travel to nearby suburbs and villages for gender and sexuality campaigns and sensitization, and in their discourse, the figure of the village-girl emerges repeatedly.

In an incident involving Janam's intervention in the stopping of an underage woman's marriage using the threat of suspension of microfinance loans, Roy shows this pedagogic agenda quite clearly. The Janam official stands at a moral high ground to the surrounding rural community and uses her creditor status to “leverage social change that she desired in the world” (125). In such action and stance, I imagine Janam and its members occupy a place where *their own hold* over what they think is feminism, with sensitivity to cultural and social context, is strengthened. They become a bit more feminist by teaching others in the rural community via a feminist pedagogy.

Srila Roy's book *Changing the Subject* provides a sensitive portrayal of the pushes and pulls present in a subject's personal and public (political?) lives as one negotiates one's identity as a feminist activist – sometimes in autonomy, sometimes in co-optation. I read this ethnography less as being about the sexual lives and choices of the characters mentioned in the book and more as a comment on subjectivities growing in post-2010s India and having already entered a chapter of late liberalization. It is an important illustration of how pulls and pressures of a large canvas of change show themselves up in the intimate interstices of one's life to animate a sexual subjectivity. In my reading, thus, I show Roy's recent book as an account of the economic production of sexual agency and choice-behavior, where the state's economic policies are striking a loud, percussive background score as the subject grows into new chapters of sexual agency. In such a reading, I must recommend Roy's book to scholars of South Asian state formations and postcolonial ones, not only scholars who focus on queer, feminist politics.

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