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978-1-107-11721-1 - Fantasy of Modernity Romantic Love in Bombay Cinema of the 1950s

Aarti Wani

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Love and romance have been ubiquitous to Hindi cinema's narrative universe. The idiom of love inhabits all kinds of films and genres and is often considered one of Hindi cinema's essential ingredients. The 'love interest' generally central to films is at times peripheral; it being extremely rare to have a mainstream Hindi film without love. However, the pervasiveness of romantic love over the last five decades has been taken for granted and rarely attracted focused theoretical attention.¹ This critical indifference to the phenomenon of love in films is even more striking in the case of the 1950s because a powerful formula centred on the trope of romantic love was consolidated during this period although its seeds were present through the earlier period of mythologicals, historicals, socials and action films. Barnouw and Krishnaswami say about the 1950s that an overwhelming number of Bombay films were centred on the chance acquaintance of the hero and heroine, who met in 'unconventional', 'novel' and 'glamorous' circumstances with obstacles provided by 'villainy or accident' and 'not by social problems' (Barnouw and Krishnaswami, 1980, p. 155). The role of dance and song for providing 'conventionalized substitutes for love-making and emotional crisis' was also noted (*ibid.*). Arnold Alison (1991) notes the excessive engagement with love in the songs and the lyrics from this period. Indeed the 1950s preoccupation with the trope of love is extraordinary and evident in its themes, lyrics, the visual aesthetics, and also in the publicity and gossip surrounding films and film stars. Nevertheless, the importance of romance as a 'major signifier of this new-nation-in the making', something that can be said to have had 'a dim after-life after the Nehruvian era' (Sangari, 2007, p. 278), has received little attention. In seeking to understand the meaning of romantic love in the films of the post-independence decade, this book aims to explore its wider cultural significance in the making of modernity.

In settling on the period from 1947 to the early 1960s, which I refer to as the 'fifties moment', I am guided as much by aesthetic and popular perceptions as by a periodization that cinema studies in India has found useful.² Thus, if independence and the partition cuts the 'fifties moment' from an earlier period, then the entry

¹ Rachel Dwyer's *All you want is Money, All you need is Love: Sex and Romance in Modern India* (2000), a book-length intervention is perhaps an exception. However, Dwyer's focus is on love as it was imagined and deployed in films in the nineties and she is concerned with placing it within a consumerist logic.

² A periodization, such as the fifties and the seventies, has emerged from the work of Vasudevan (1989), Prasad (2008) and Thomas (1995).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Fantasy of Modernity

of colour in the mid-sixties separates it from a later period, giving it a distinctive black and white aesthetic unity.³ Significantly, this is a period that saw the medium mature. The variety of themes and genres, the aesthetic mastery over sound and visuality at the hands of some of the finest filmmakers, aided by the contribution of actors, lyricist, music directors and other technicians, testify to the achievement of the fifties as unmatched in the history of Hindi cinema. If the euphoric experience of national independence, laced as it was with the anguish of partition overwhelmed the moment, it has also shaped the way scholars have engaged with the period. The 1950s 'social' has been viewed as a major force contributing to the formation of national identity and the imagining of modernity (Vasudevan, 1989; Prasad, 2008). I draw on this discourse but take it to a hitherto ignored and unexplored area of love and romance. In doing so, I also rely on an instinct that popular perception of this period has always associated its cinema with romance and love.

Love and the nation

Love and Romance, with its assumptions about individual choice and agency in the formation of the couple and its private spaces are associated with post-enlightenment modernity. In its cinematic versions, particularly that of Hollywood, love is seen as continuing the project of modernity, albeit as a complex and conflictual trajectory. In her book *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance* (1993), Virginia Wexman investigates Hollywood's construction of the couple against the background of American social history. Noting the complex processes and interrelations between cultural products and social practices, she explores an ever evolving narrative of romance via cinematic genres, star performances and acting styles. In the American context, cinema is often seen as representing and actively contributing to the cultural discourse of love because it 'constantly performs, creates, and deliberates on acts of love' (Fuery, 2000, p. 102). Consequently, love in cinema is viewed as reflecting, as it invents and reconfigures, the culture's understanding and practice of love and romance. Indeed, most available discussion of romance in the West has this context of the experience and reality of love as a psychosocial phenomenon in the culture at large. Typically, cinematic romance and love stories are sought to be understood by connecting them either with the history of the phenomenon or with the psychological experience (of historical subjects) of romantic love. For instance, a study of romance narratives suggests that 'naming love by turning it into a story is the oldest of the "deep structures" used to make (artificial)

³ Even though we have the occasional colour scene or film right through the mid-fifties, it is only from the middle of the 1960s that a sizable number of films are made in colour.

Introduction

sense of its complexity, not least in accounting for the apparently irrational behaviour of the beloved (such as hostility, faithlessness, disappearance)' (Lynne, 2007, p. 2). Thus, intrinsically connected to real-time psychosocial experience, narratives are seen as repositories of 'all that is essentially irrational, contradictory and *cause-less* about romantic love' (ibid., p. 17). Similarly, scholars of cinematic romance routinely argue that 'When a movie's story concerns romance, the movie must be understood as both incorporating those norms and understandings governing romance that exist in the actual world and, in reciprocal fashion, retransmitting them back into the culture reinforced or reenergized' (Dowd & Pallotta, 2000, p. 565). It is no surprise therefore that Wexman's discussion of the creation of the Hollywood couple quite automatically leads to a search for its historical origins to note that 'the emphasis on romantic love and its association with marriage and personal fulfilment first took hold in the nineteenth century as part of the romantic cult of individualism' (Wexman, 1993, p. 12). What is of interest about this discourse is its understanding of the imagination, narration and/or performance of love in relation to a historical, lived experience of love. In our context, how do we understand or make sense of the spectacular form, role and place of romantic love in the Hindi films of the 1950s? Is it possible to put the fifties' text and context of love in a representational and/or ideological play and to see the imaginary of romance as a mode of reinforcement or transgression?

Any consideration of a contextual or historical reading of cinematic love in our context comes up against the absence of a substantial social history of love along with its limited presence as real psychosocial experience in the lives of most people.⁴ Love, its rituals, conventions and spaces of courtship, dating and fruition are not only absent as quotidian experience from the lives of a majority of Indians, but its practice has often attracted subtle and not so subtle, indeed, often brutal opposition and hostility in the hierarchically organized community lives of most citizens.⁵ 'Is it

⁴ It is virtually impossible to find any serious and scholarly engagement with romantic love in India. Sociological writings in journals and books often deal with issues of gender, marriage, divorce, kinship, sexuality, alternative sexualities, but almost never with romantic love. Do we say therefore that romantic love is not a 'social fact' in India?

⁵ The absence of social sanction for romantic love is not extensively documented in sociological scholarship but assumed by scholars of Indian culture and society, many of whom I refer to and cite in the course of this book. In this context, Prem Choudhary's *Contentious Marriages, Eloping Couples: Gender, Caste and Patriarchy in Northern India* (2009), is a rare study that presents the difficult trajectory of romantic love in a societal context hostile to it. This is not to say that despite social proscription, there have not been individuals and couples, who experience(d) (un)successful romantic relationships. In addition, the highly diverse economic and cultural realities of groups and communities in India mean that there has been greater or lesser engagement with and access to modernization.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Fantasy of Modernity

possible to write a history of love?’ asks Sudipta Kaviraj at the beginning of his article on *Tagore and Transformations in the Ideals of Love* (2007). Indeed, is it? Kaviraj answers in affirmative with a few provisos and proceeds to write what he terms a ‘conceptual and social history of love through the prism of Rabindranath Tagore’ (p. 161). Significantly, Kaviraj focuses on the textual history of the transformation of the idiom of love from its Sanskrit roots focused on *Shringara* and *Rupa* through to its modern, interiorized, and individualizing form in the novels of Tagore and others. Noting the near absence of a social form to love even in the time of the novel – ‘the vast majority in Bengali society calmly carried on practicing arranged marriage’, Kaviraj observes,

novels tend to create an impression of commonplaceness of such action and behaviour, giving them a misleading aura of ordinariness, i.e. such things as engaging in love relationships happen all the time in novels in a society in which these things happen only rarely (p. 181).

Observing further the ‘fictional normalization’ of the conduct of love through novels and their production of a ‘new sensibility’, Kaviraj also points to the similar role played by ‘Bengali romantic films with Uttamkumar and Suchitra Sen’ (ibid.). The history of love in Bengal, or for that matter, in India is, in fact, unavoidably that of its repertoire, its idiom, its poetic or literary themes and forms, its theatrical and now, cinematic avatars. The absence of a social history that narrates the everyday experience of romantic of love in the lives of ordinary people is in direct contrast to its presence in the enormously rich and varied repertoire across time as Francesca Orsini (2007) demonstrates.⁶ Love has always been in the air and occupied our affective universe as it has been endlessly narrativized, performed, and encoded in words, songs and dance. Indeed, love’s position in literature, observes Orsini, is ‘quite out of proportion ... to its place in real life’ (p. 2). Bringing together an impressive body of work that enumerates and comments upon the numerous sites and forms of love; the ‘Sanskrit and Prakrit repertoire centring on *Shringara* and *Kama*’, the ‘Perso-Arabic repertoire centring on *Ishq* and *Muhabbat*’ and the ‘modern repertoire of *prem* and *love*’ (p. 4), Orsini’s book is a testimony to the culture’s deep engagement with love’s many shades, tones and varieties as it is of its predominantly textual nature.

The absence of the ordinary experience of romantic love in pre-capitalist, patriarchal societies needs no explanation given that its quotidian social practice

Thus, education, westernization and consequent liberalism amongst the general elite as well as those amongst Christian and Anglo-Indian communities have allowed them a greater tolerance and even positive acceptance of romantic love.

⁶ Kaviraj’s essay features in the same anthology.

Cambridge University Press

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Aarti Wani

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

assumes a degree of modern individuation and self-actualization. Consequently, a semblance of gender equality, freedom of choice and a degree of democratization of public life, along with corresponding decrease in the role and power of family, community and other traditional structures and norms shaping individual lives are also prerequisites for love to flourish. Is it possible that the constraint on the real experience of love in such societies itself drives its explosion in the realm of the imagination? Orsini suggests that in a 'patriarchal and segregated society, poems, songs and stories about love not only give voice to deeply held human feelings, but may also offer bounded, hence limited but important, expression to feelings and desires that the dominant ideology considers illicit or destructive of the social fabric' (Orsini, 2007, p. 23). Clearly, unlike the West, it is not possible to read in the sub-continent's literature, the culture's discursive engagement with love as an existent everyday psychosocial phenomenon. Indeed, literary love is instead theorized as being an affective force field that its users enter to experience something that has very little credence or validity in their material and social lives.

Orsini's insights and indeed that of the many other contributions in *Love in South Asia*, Kaviraj's included, influence this consideration of romantic love in films, particularly of the post-independence decade. Is love in the 1950s film equally an expression and experience of the illicit and the proscribed? To be sure, as a site of prohibition and escape, love in cinema was a textual intervention, in some ways, following upon and continuing earlier modes of textuality. After all, the films of the 1950s played out the excesses of romantic love in a context where a majority of the audience was faced with a constraining reality that denied most a socially acceptable experience, expression/performance of falling in love. However, the story of cinematic love, particularly that of the 1950s, is complicated because even as it continued to use, reproduce and reform motifs, imagery, themes and the performative and visual languages inherited from the sub-continent's repertoire of love, it did so in a radically modern form in terms of technology, effect and reach, hence, calling for a different and critical engagement. Thus, we need to ask does the imagination of love, which had historically taken various forms in legend and literature, transform and mutate in the Hindi cinema of the 1950s as it aligned with modernity's myths of individualism, freedom, agency, movement, speed and urbanity? By holding onto the thread of romantic love, can we entertain a dialogue with the 'fifties moment' and its relationship with the promises and anxieties of modernity?

Film scholarship of the post-independence decade has drawn attention to the project and anxiety of modernity as it was imagined and articulated in the cinema of the period while also noting its intersection with the nation on the one hand and tradition on the other. Scholars have variously looked at the presence of tradition,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Fantasy of Modernity

in form, content and spectator position in the modern practice of cinema.⁷ Crucially, cinema as the site for constructing the nation and providing a national identity has been the central concern. Seeing in Indian popular cinema an 'evocation and inscription of Indian national identity', Sumita Chakravarty (1993, p. 5), for instance, attempts a reading of this cinema against its condemnation by an elite opinion which claimed to safeguard 'Indianness', and finds in its 'contaminating, masquerading impersonating impulse' (p. 10), a 'mediated form of national consciousness' (p. 9). Ravi Vasudevan (1994) too views the 1950s film as responding to the processes of modernity 'by conceptualizing an extended geography for the national subject' (p. 108). By bringing together a variety of concerns and motifs such as geography, travel, community, region, representation of gender and modes of address, Vasudevan unravels this cinema's production of a 'national space', while alerting us to the uncertainties and fissures inherent to the enterprise. Reading the 1949 film *Andaz* (Dir. Mehboob) to bring out the contradictions at the heart of the fifties cinema's involvement in 'nation-building as *modernizing* enterprise' (Vasudevan, 1995, p. 84), Vasudevan unravels its complex mechanisms of framing, *mise-en-scène* and narrative staging. The tension between the pleasure of transgression afforded by the heroine, Neena's persona, and the narrative closure that inflicts on her a punishing regime emanating from and representing a masculine, and patriarchal 'nationalist authority', places the woman as the emergent figure of modernity in need of containment. Vasudevan (1995a) suggests that *Andaz* set a trend in the 1950s whereby a gendered modernity was systematically erased by the 'foregrounding of masculine activities and romantic fulfillment' (p. 104). According to this reading, through strategic framing and carefully calibrated processes of melodramatic narration that produced moral hierarchies, the spectator was invited into the space of the nation.⁸ More recently, Bhaskar Sarkar's, *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition* (2009), a book-length exploration of Indian cinema's complicated negotiation and participation in the project of nationhood, focuses on the history and memory of the

⁷ According to Chidanand Dasgupta (1991), the spectator continues to have a pre-modern, irrational expectation and understanding, for Ashis Nandi (1995), cinema continues to carry the traces of pre-modern form and traditions and Ashis Rajadhyaksha (1987a, 1987b) has drawn attention to frontality and the *darshanik* visual conventions in early cinema.

⁸ Vasudevan (2011, p. 64) has since nuanced his position to see Indian cinema as instantiating an 'unprecedented public congregation outside the constraints of ritual and social hierarchies based on caste and community proscription'. Calling it an 'illegitimate form that flew in the face of priorities generated by state cultural officials and elite publics invested in national culture-based on classical and folk forms and realist imperatives', Vasudevan suggests that the cinema 'provided an alternative public realm, if rather different from the countercultural connotations of that category'.

Introduction

particular event of the partition of the subcontinent as a foundational and traumatic moment of origin, loss and mourning. Describing his book to be about the 'historicity of cinematic representations of partition' (p. 3), Sarkar explores the extension of the one traumatic event in the life of the nation as it refracts through many sites of experience and representation. Intrigued by post-independence cinema's apparent silence over this momentous event from its immediate and constitutive past, Sarkar situates the 1950s cinema in relation to the nationalist project. Tracking this cinema's conflictual relationship with the state and government institution, he explores its allegorical relation to the trauma of partition. Earlier in the nineties, the narrative of nationalism had found an additional dimension of the state in the work of Madhava Prasad. In *Ideology of Hindi Film* (2008), Prasad argued that the heterogeneous mode of manufacture of film is reflected in film form, the most dominant of which is that of the feudal family romance (pp. 99–100). As a part of a hegemonic cultural project, the feudal family romance carries the ideological burden of the continuing presence of a pre-capitalist economic and social organization that has arrested the development of democratic formations and modernity. The resultant 'blocking' of the 'representation of the private' is behind the unwritten ban on the kiss. This 'injunction against the representation of the private' reflects the ideology of the state in its paternalist attitude to women and in the preservation of tradition. The policies of the state play a crucial role, in this reading, in fabricating a national culture through cinema.

The authority of nationalism as the explanatory trope of post-independence cinema is not surprising given that the emergence of this cinema was co-temporal with the formation of the Indian nation state, which in turn had followed upon the heels of an immensely popular mass movement for national independence. The category of the national has given weight to reflections on several formal, thematic and visual articulations in the post-independence Hindi cinema, such as the visual consolidation of national geography through travel and landscape, a moral economy influenced by an understanding of Indian tradition, the recurrence of certain motifs, figures, and power structures associated with the nation's history, as well as technologies of framing and representation. But it has been unable to account for the 1950s films' overwhelming investment in romantic love. In performance and song, through spectacle and *mise-en-scène*, and often also in the main pivot of plots and stories, romantic love had in fact overwhelmed the 1950s. The national argument, however, resting on the assumption that films address as they construct national subjects by providing moments and spaces in the cinematic for identification with the collective unity of the nation, examines deep structures in films that connect with a pre-existing set of values, images, symbols, myths, legends, motifs and metaphors held by the audience in a kind of collective unconscious. In the process, romantic

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Aarti Wani

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Fantasy of Modernity

love of the films, seen as mere surface, vehicle or formula is ignored or sidelined. Criticizing the national turn in film studies generally, Walsh (1996, p. 15) argues that 'National imaginary criticism limits itself by the assumption that artworks function overwhelmingly to manage an unconscious psychical economy'. It was perhaps romantic love's, self-evident, surface-level ubiquity that made it invisible to critics looking for deeper, unconscious meanings underlying this superficial waste of spectacle and affect. Also, since romantic love was this 'strange affair' having little credence, either ideational or practical in the lives of Indians as 'Indians', an anomalous 'non-Indian' or foreign thing that played minimal role, if any, in the quotidian culture of the nation, it was automatically ignored or underexamined by criticism focused on nationhood and modernity.

Little wonder, then, that discussion about the 'national' in cinema has slipped by the obvious role and presence of romance in Indian cinema. To be sure, Madhava Prasad speaks of the formation of the couple, but only to insist that the prohibition of the private, evinced in the unwritten ban on the kiss, is the ultimate postponement of modernity's promise of individuation. However, if lovers did not kiss on Indian screens, they bravely romanced and serenaded each other in public; in the public spaces of gardens and streets in the cinematic diegesis, and effectively in the public, though darkened, space of the cinema. The question is what kinds of publics were thereby created? Do we find in the interstices of 'Indian modernity' revealed through the nation, yet another, alternative modernity afforded by the transgressive pleasures of romance? Perhaps we need a more calibrated understanding of the films' trade in identities and pleasures? Do we find lurking within the folds of a national imagination, other, alternate forms of being and experience encoded and effected by cinema? In the dark space of the theater, where each is alone with others, did the spectator, finding herself intermittently relieved of the burden of nationhood, escape into an affective no-man's-land of romantic fantasy? I suggest cinematic modernity in the 1950s was being configured and negotiated through romantic love. In doing so, undoubtedly, it weaved itself with the concerns of the nation as it ploughed in the traditional. However, the sheer volume of cinematic investment in romance as also the excesses of this imagination, allowed it to construct and make public identities, situations, events, moods, ideas, and spaces that elide, exceed or reshape the contours of the traditional and the national. In other words 'love and romance', I would like to argue, is cinema's fantasy of the modern in the 1950s.

At this point, it is worth taking a detour to ask, was there any place or role for romantic love in the nationalist imagination, either in the praxis of national struggle or in the ideas or ideals of the new nation in the making? That the youth involved in the national struggle for independence experienced the romance of adventure, danger

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Aarti Wani

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

and at times violence is a matter of legend. For instance, the romanticism inherent in the life and struggle of young revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh and his comrades was palpable as it was cinematic; evident from the numerous films it engendered.⁹ But the question about what the freedom fighters thought of love becomes urgent only if romantic love is imagined to be relevant for any transformative politics trying to create a new social order.¹⁰ Even though an exploration of the emergence of the romantic episteme during and within the fold of the nationalist movement is beyond the scope of the present study, it is interesting, if perhaps reductive, to read Bhagat Singh's ideas on love as representative of a larger revolutionary sentiment. In a letter to his friend and comrade, Sukhadev, Bhagat Singh eulogizes love as a great support in life's struggle, demands that it be 'pure', unlike the 'animal attraction' seen in films, and expects that it will finally transcend the individual to merge with a universal love of mankind (Chamanlal, 2007, p. 187). Despite the fact that Bhagat Singh seems to allow youngsters the choice of falling in love, while asking them to rise above it, in actual practice, romantic love remained an anomaly and could not be normalized nor acquire social sanction even during the heady days of anti-colonial struggle in the early decades of the century. It is interesting, therefore, that it is during this time that its textual life took ever new and secular forms in the novels, plays and films, which contributed to the making of a modern public sphere. Similar to its discursive formation in Bengali novels (Kaviraj, 2007), there was a veritable explosion of love in novels and stories written in Marathi, Hindi and other languages.¹¹ Attributing the

⁹ Christopher Pinney (2004, p. 203) ascribes the preponderance of films on Bhagat Singh to the nature of visual history as distinct from the textual history of the nation in the making. According to him, this explains why there have been hardly any films on 'official' national figures like Gandhi and Nehru, who dominate textual histories, while 'unofficial' figures like Bhagat Singh have been celebrated visually, not only in pictures, posters, and calendars but also in innumerable films. One may also add that the popular film culture's investment in youth, beauty, romance, and drama also likely made Bhagat Singh the preferred choice for cinematic rendition as against the more somber 'official' national figures.

¹⁰ Rabindranath Tagore's profound understanding of this necessity is evident in his writing, particularly in the seminal *Gora* (Tagore, 2002). Mapping the immense changes in social organization, opinions, beliefs and practices on to the person of his eponymous hero, Gora, a white man raised in a Hindu family, Tagore makes love the conduit to the transformation of the self in alignment with modernity's many challenges, not only on the national scale but those ushered by and requiring a commitment to a larger, internationalist humanism.

¹¹ Among the many specimens of this genre, a collection of stories in Marathi stands out for its realistic engagement with a gendered urban modernity. *Kalyanche Nishwas* (Blossom's sighs) written by Vibhavari Shirurkar (pen name) in 1933 brought together tales of thwarted, unrequited love, all told in the first person by young college going or working girls. At a time when narratives with romantic love, often with sexual overtones were popularly read, this collection received much flak and criticism for what was seen as an obscene articulation of women's feelings. The authors, Shirurkar (2006) and

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11721-1 - Fantasy of Modernity Romantic Love in Bombay Cinema of the 1950s

Aarti Wani

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Fantasy of Modernity

popularity of such fiction among women in the Hindi public sphere to the fledgling individualism of the 'right to feel', Orsini (2002, p. 289) suggests that these 'social romances defended and legitimized 'individual feeling''.¹² Orsini, however, goes on to observe that this exploration of 'individual feelings' was bound to be merely textual and literary, since its relationship to reality was to remain 'at best oblique' (ibid.).

Even as the colonial encounter, capitalist industrialization, modernization and the national movement for political independence caused enormous social churning, romantic love remained illegitimate and continued to be a rare and extraordinary occurrence. In this regard, the history of the law that made love marriage possible and legal is intriguing. Tracing the origins, tumultuous progress and consolidation of the law that opened a space in which 'two Indians could legitimately marry out of choice and love rather than by the dictates of birth', Mody (2002, p. 223), demonstrates the historical schism between the law governing free unions between couples in love and its social acceptability. Throughout its checkered history, the law, first passed in late nineteenth century and consolidated with the passing of the Special Marriage Act in 1954, met with sharp criticism and resistance from religious bodies and individuals, who felt it to be against their faith and way of life. Significantly, when the law, making love marriage legal for the first time, was first passed in 1872, after much deliberation and vitriol, it actually accommodated its critics by virtually excommunicating the marrying couple from their respective religious communities. At all times, even after the Special Marriage Act, the law concedes parental authority by mandating a period of time between the registration of the desire to marry and its solemnizing, as a time given for parental intervention.¹³ Mody observes that love marriage in India continues to be viewed as a challenge to 'natural' (that which *Kudarath* or nature, has created) caste hierarchy, and social considerations of class, status and standing' (pp. 225–226). Parental pressures, community norms and caste rules governing alliances have continued to overpower young desire for autonomy. How do we understand this obdurate resistance to individual choice and agency in the realm of the private, despite the

The author, Shirurkar (2006), in a preface to a recent edition insists that she was only capturing the changing reality of women's experience on the cusp of modernity. I thank Madhuri Dixit for pointing out this collection.

¹² That several explorations of individualism in novels were markedly gendered is evident from novels with eponymous heroines like, *Nalini* (1920), *Ragini* (1914), *Sushilecha Dev* (1953), *Indu Kale*, *Sarla Bhole* (1934) and others.

¹³ According to Mody, the Act possibly retains concerns about parental guidance from earlier enactments of the law (ibid., p. 233).