# Land, Language, Body: Feminine Autonomy in Krishna Sobti's "Mitro Marjani"

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Krishna Sobti is considered in equal parts a pathbreaking writer on female autonomy, a Partition writer, and a writer who wrote multiple languages into her Hindi.[1] In many ways, her straddling of the canons of Partition writers and women writers is symptomatic of her exploration of the mapping of geographical borders upon women's bodies. This exploration, I argue, is undertaken through experiments in literary form and language through which the nature and the nationalist significations of Hindi come to be altered. This article analyzes Krishna Sobti's novella, "Mitro Marjani" (*To Hell with You, Mitro*, 1966) with a focus on an experimental usage of Hindi that allows her to replace patriarchal, nation-centric forms of relationality with forms of intimacy and subjecthood that are based in feminine sexual desire and autonomy.

Although lacking any direct references to Partition, and thus excluded from the canon of Partition literature, the novella studied here betrays a preoccupation with the female body that, I argue, needs to be read in relation to the gendered violence of the Partition. At the same time, its experimental use of Hindi to portray feminine characters who broke convention places it in conversation with language debates around Hindi and its representation through tropes of virtuous femininity. This article begins with a review of scholarship that discusses the feminization of languages such as Hindi and Urdu and the dominant Hindu investment of both with gendered values in the early twentieth century. Based on the delineation of specific kinds of femininity through Hindi,[2] I then consider the anthropologist Veena Das's discussion of gendered violence during the Partition and the figure of the displaced or kidnapped woman as what Das calls the "sexed citizen." Das's analysis of the interweaving narratives of kinship and nationhood that sexualize the female body for their own coherence allows me to examine *Mitro Marjani*'s transgression of kinship structures that the Partition had disrupted.

## The feminization of language

In her book *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* Francesca Orsini traces the Hindi public sphere's simultaneous development of Hindi into an elastic and flexible idiom through newspapers, journals, and educational institutions,

and the instatement of a nationalist "normativity" within this idiom. Integral to this process of the standardization—and normativization—of Hindi was the work of Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi, who in his stewardship of the journal *Saraswati* worked towards purging Hindi of the influences of proximate languages such as Braj, Maithili, and Awadhi and emphasizing its Sanskritic elements. It was this Hindi that the "normative" public sphere came to invest with a sense of modern nationhood as well as its accompanying heteropatriarchal proclivities.

Sujata Mody's book *The Making of Modern Hindi*, which focuses on Dwivedi's role in shaping Hindi as a proto-national language, analyzes the use of visual media in *Saraswati*, including several cartoons that depict Hindi as well as other languages in the form of women. In one cartoon where Hindi is represented as an old woman wearing a *sari* seated on the floor, and Urdu as a young woman wearing the 'fashionable' and less modest dress of a *churidar*, we find the two languages/women attributed with a rhetoric that references Hindu codes of gendered morality. Mody notes:

> The personification of Hindi as a selfless and noble mother tormented by her self-serving, defiant, and profligate daughter, Urdu, reflects the extant gender biases of the Hindi public sphere in which women were indeed the subjects of literary discourse, but only insofar as they needed to be idealized, protected, reformed, or excluded. (31)

"(S)uch gendering," she adds, "categorically recommended the rejection of Urdu in favor of Hindi as a contender for official and/or national status on moral rather than linguistic grounds" (Mody 31). Mody's analysis draws attention to the instrumentalization of the moral or immoral female body as the battleground for language politics, such that an argument in favor of Hindi would simultaneously be an argument for a Hindu heteropatriarchal order wherein the morally 'good' woman is Hindu, maternal, and thus a suitable metaphor for Hindi, and the woman of loose morals is Muslim, a sexually depraved courtesan, and a metaphor for Urdu.

A similar allocation of gendered and religious values to Hindu and Muslim women is seen in the late-nineteenth-century play *Nagari aur Urdu ka ek Svang* [*A Satire of Nagari* (Hindi) *and Urdu*, 1889] which was written by Pandit Gauri Datta.[3] In this play, we see characters titled "Begam Urdu" and "Queen Devanagari" vying for ascendance to the "throne" of national language in a court of law. Queen Devanagari, who, Christopher King writes, "complains that Begam Urdu has usurped her former rule over all works of wisdom and virtue" is associated in the play with "righteousness" and "wisdom" (King 181). Her lawyers argue that under her reign, "fraud would vanish, good deeds would multiply, [and] people would feed Brahmins" (King 181). On the other side Begam Urdu, along with her train of witnesses (all of whom carry Islamic titles), is characterized as disreputable, wanton, and licentious, and announces that

she shall teach people to become "lovers and rakes," "squander [their] treasure" upon prostitutes and neglect the "[t]asks of the household" (Datta qtd. in King 181). While King's article is significant for its analysis of the growing "identification of 'Hindu' with Hindi and of 'Muslim' with Urdu" in nineteenth-century Benaras, its discussion of Pandit Gauri Datta's play neglects to recognize the gendered values through which this identification was often carried out (King 183). The lens of Hindu morality through which both Queen Devanagari and Begum Urdu are judged demands a femininity that is domestic, sexually modest, and upper-caste. While Queen Devanagari is an exemplar of each, Begum Urdu is shown as embodying the opposite values.

Datta's use of female figures for the embodiment of the Hindi and Urdu languages, and simultaneously of the Hindu and Muslim communities from a Hindu perspective, is illustrative of a misogyny embedded in both the use and the idea of the Hindi language. Hindi frames and articulates normative patriarchal performances of gender, while non-normative and disruptive social behavior is displaced upon the Muslim 'other' embodied by Begam Urdu, who represents both the Urdu language and Muslim femininity. This figuration of Hindi as a good Hindu woman shows Hindi establishing a stable patriarchy upon the site of 'good' Hindu femininity as well as domesticity. On the other hand, Urdu is figured as 'bad' Muslim femininity that threatens to disrupt a Hindu configuration of national identity.

Pandit Gauri Datta's play as well as the cartoons studied by Mody are early examples of how the discourse around Hindi's supremacy relied upon notions of 'good' and 'bad' women to service a Hindu national cultural identity. The categories set into motion by these texts serve as a pre-independence anticipation of the enactment of communal and national tensions upon the female body and upon language, which came to be cathected with a heightened charge during the Partition.

## Partition, the state, and the "sexed" citizen

In her book *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, Veena Das addresses patriarchal articulations of the female body as central to the state's narration of a national-cultural identity during the Partition. In her discussion of the state's efforts at the rehabilitation of women—whom she refers to as the "sexed" citizen—Das points out that the state's authority was predicated upon a sense of social disorder created in part by the state's own narratives (18). In the face of such disorder, the state's positioning of itself as the "rational guarantor of order" was based upon its interventions to reinstate abducted women's relationships with the "'right' kinds of men," that is their male relatives through patriarchal contracts of birth and marriage (Das 19). By doing so, Das claims, the state established itself in the moment of the Partition—and therefore in the moment of the nation's foundation—as deeply imbricated in the sexual

contract. Moreover, the state's interest in women, she argues, "was not premised upon their definition as citizens but as sexual and reproductive beings … [W]hat was at stake was the honor of the nation because women as sexual and reproductive beings were being forcibly held" (Das 26). In Das's analysis, the foundational moment of the Partition becomes one in which the state's links to patriarchy and the connections between the social and the sexual contract surface in the figure of the abducted woman. Central to her argument is the idea that the family as an institution is not merely located in the domain of the private. Rather, "sovereignty continues to draw life from the family. The involvement of the state in the process of recovery of women shows that if men were to become ineffective in the control they exercise as heads of families, thus producing children from 'wrong' sexual unions, then the state itself would come to be deprived of life" (Das 33).

Das's attention to the overwriting of the social contract upon the sexual contract is significant not only for the light it sheds upon the trauma generated by the Partition, but also for the ways in which a national identity was founded upon it. As Rochona Majumdar has shown, opposition to the Hindu Code Bill, which in the 1950s proposed to give daughters the same property rights as sons in a joint family, and the passing of the Hindu Succession Act in 1956, which "sought to ensure … that property remained in male hands" were indicative of the continuing centrality of the joint family to national identity. Majumdar notes that arguments that opposed women's right to inherit property employed a "rhetoric … of the family as a necessarily harmonious unit" and "saw the extended family … as the ballast for a free Indian society" (230, 231). The "masculine nation" as it was thus established came to be structured around the reproductive heteronormativity instituted in the joint family (Das 13). As we will see, the forms of kinship that Das and Majumdar locate in a nationhood mediated through patriarchy become objects of critique in "Mitro Marjani".

## "Mitro Marjani": Centering the female body

In the face of the Partition, the instrumentalization of the female body, and the feminization of language, Sobti's 1966 novella "Mitro Marjani," significant for its use of a Hindi that draws on dialect, presents a narrative deeply preoccupied with the female body and its place in the patriarchal joint family. Using the language of the folk, Sobti not only depicts tradition but also its dissolution facilitated by the very female bodies that it surveils, and upon which its stability is predicated. It is through the medium of this language that Sobti represents both the titular character Mitro's assertions of selfhood and desire and a modern intimacy that transcends the legitimized intimacies of the joint family.

The novella depicts scenes from the life of Mitro, the middle daughter-in-law in a joint family of three married brothers, also addressed in the narrative by way of her position in the family, as "Manjhli" ("the middle one") or "Manjhli bahu" ("the middle daughter-in-law"). We first encounter Mitro in a scene of violence, dishevelled from the beatings meted out to her by her husband, Sardari, in response to rumors of Mitro's affairs with other men. Early in the narrative, then, Mitro's body becomes the site of surveillance and violence. Spying into Mitro and Sardari's room, Dhanwanti sees "Mitro, with hair dishevelled and scattered, [trying] to free herself of Sardari Lal while he held her tight and laid blows upon her" (12). Mitro responds to the beatings with a pride and arrogance that the narrative depicts through close attention to her physicality. As Sardari threatens to hit her again unless she averts her eyes from him to display the "shame" appropriate to her as a woman, Mitro "[does] no such thing, but [stares] back at him with her big brown eyes," and "[raises] her chin even higher" (12). When Dhanwanti tries to convince Mitro to relent and let Sardari win the argument, Mitro's "kohl-lined eyes [shine] even further" (12). As the narrative peers a second time into Sardari and Mitro's bedroom, this time through the eyes of the patriarch and father-in-law Gurudas, we are told that "when the closed door opened, Gurudas could not believe his eyes. Manjhli bahu, her head uncovered, sat laughing on the cot and his older son Banwari gnashed his teeth and looked on helplessly" (16). In this very first scene then, which takes place, we learn, in the middle of the night, a scene of legitimized domestic intimacy is replaced by domestic violence. Mitro's mocking laughter foreshadows both the sexual dissatisfaction and male impotency that will be gradually revealed over the length of the narrative. It also encodes the transgressive speech and physicality through which Mitro articulates her autonomy and her non-reproductive sexual desire, and places the blame for her childlessness upon Sardari. As Raji Narasimhan points out in her analysis of the novella, owing to Sardari's impotency, the "fruition of child-bearing, of motherhood, is not writ for Mitro. Not only is she making no secret of it, she is absolving herself as the reason for this not-to-be" (178-179).

Mitro deviates severely from the norms set in place for her as a married woman, as she is defined not through her purity and chastity, but rather through her vanity, sexual desire, and autonomy. In a conversation with the family's oldest daughter-in-law Suhag, we see Mitro's disregard for familial relationships articulated less as a conscious decision on the part of Mitro, and more the product of a genuine incomprehension of patriarchal norms because of her own distance from normative kinship systems:

> An astonished Suhag touched her hand to her chin—tell me the truth, *devrani,* what brought you to such bad ways?
>
> Mitro did not hesitate. Lying on the bed, she explained—Upon the seven rivers, my mother, black as the bottom of a pan, brought me into her womb, white as snow. She says, Mitro is the spitting image

> of the most powerful tehsildar of the area. Now you tell me, *jithani* (older co-sister-in-law), where should I find willpower like yours? And my husband, he fails to understand my affliction. Enough of having it every once in a while . . . my body craves so much more, so much, that I feel tortured. (Sobti, *MM* 17)

Mitro's narration of her 'origin story,' as it were, frames her own lack of "willpower" in terms of her upbringing. As we will see later, Mitro's mother's "blackness" acts as a corollary to her status as an outcaste, while also directly referencing lower-caste positions. Thus, if Mitro lacks Suhag's modesty, it is because her own birth has denied her both the morality and sense of hierarchy that are reproduced in her marital family: her home lacked not only the father's presence but even the father's name and identity as a structuring factor.

Mitro's reference to Suhag's modesty indicates that it is not only Mitro's body but several female bodies and sexualities that the text is preoccupied with. In order to center the patriarchal joint family in the text, Sobti rightly draws attention to women's bodies as the fulcrum upon which the institution revolves and through which it perpetuates itself. Thus, we see women's domestic labor in images of Suhag and Mitro working in the kitchen, women's arrivals and departures to and from their natal homes, and multiple forms of bodily preoccupation including sexual desire, childbearing, and illness, embodied respectively in the three daughters-in-law, Mitro, Suhag, and Phoola. In its scheme of female bodies, the text presents Suhag as a foil to Mitro. Soon after the explanation of her origins, Mitro strips to nakedness and accosts Suhag with overt declarations of her sexuality. Suhag's initial repulsion to Mitro's words turns quickly into an anger through which she articulates a vision of sexuality that recalls the internalization of trauma witnessed in the utterances of Partition survivors in Das' writing:

> Tormented by [Mitro's] lack of shame, Suhag thought to herself, if a woman who puts the community's pride to shame has no remorse, then the body of a woman, corrupted nightly, is nothing but a pot of sin, and covered her face with the quilt.
>
> Mitro called out to her—my dear *jithani*, open your eyes for just a moment!
>
> …
>
> Irritated, Suhag opened her eyes and asked, what is it now?
>
> Mitro sat up. Holding her breasts in her hands, she asked, now tell me the truth, *jithani*, does any other woman have breasts like these?
>
> Rage blazed through Suhag. Smacking her head, she strode up to Mitro, and said—You fallen woman! Once you die, you'll never know you lived! Such arrogance for the body of a woman, which dissolves each day? Shame on you! Every house has a woman like

> you, dark or fair. They too have two hands like you, two feet, two eyes, and just like you, two breasts! Are you the only one with these? (19)

As the only daughter-in-law who bears a child in the narrative, Suhag's paradigm of the woman's sinning body is validated through childbearing. Mitro's description of Suhag as Dhanwanti's "maid from her previous birth" who, "[i]f you tell her to sit, she will sit, if you tell her to stand up, she will stand up," points to Suhag's pregnancy as a consequence not of her pleasure but of her dutifulness and obedience (64-5). Further, Suhag's notion of the woman's body as a "pot of sin" and "dissolv[ing] each day" form a corollary to her mother-in-law Dhanwanti's belief that "[i]t is only a hard-working body that brings true returns," which glorifies the laboring/reproductive female body over the female body that experiences pleasure, and which is acquired from Dhanwanti's own mother-in-law (11). Dhanwanti's mother-in-law, Dhanwanti herself, and Suhag thus become links in the chain of the reproduction of the joint family as an institution that circumscribes women's bodies by negating them as well as instrumentalizing them for domestic and reproductive labor.

If Suhag acts as a foil to Mitro's character, the family's youngest daughter-in-law, Phoola, who is marked by an excess of speech, a preoccupation with her body, and financial autonomy that mirror Mitro's, acts as Mitro's alter ego. Phoola claims to suffer, among other diseases, from the quintessentially feminine affliction of hysteria, in response to which she extracts herself from all household labor while continuing to reap the fruits of the other women's labor. Phoola particularly mirrors Mitro's assertion of sexual autonomy through her own assertions of her financial independence from the joint family. When her mother-in-law Dhanwanti, who sees herself as the custodian of her daughters-in-law's jewelry, insists that there is no reason for "mine and thine," in what is "everyone's house," Phoola asserts, "this is not about being a stranger or a relative, mother, it is about *my* jewelry" (Sobti, *MM* 24; italics mine). In response, Dhanwanti makes an argument for the family's common ownership of the jewelry, which leads Phoola to further assert that the jewels belong to her:

> Dhanwanti controlled her anger and spoke softly . . . Phoola, this is a joint family—its seams are secure, and we share everything. Such talk of animosity doesn't suit the women of the family!
>
> Phoola, spoiling for a fight, cried, Why should anyone have the gifts given to me by my mother? Why should they be distributed? Are they common property to be looted? (Sobti, *MM* 24)

Dhanwanti's anger at Phoola and her claim that in a joint family all the "seams are secure" gesture towards the accumulation of wealth that takes place within the husband's family through marriage, and in particular, its

movement with the female subject whose reproductive body is part of the dowry received—an ownership rejected by Phoola as well as Mitro. It is by acting upon her assertions of autonomy that Phoola departs from the narrative, forsaking her marital family for her natal home with her husband in tow, thus breaking the "secure seams" that Dhanwanti had evoked. In the parallelism of Mitro and Phoola, Sobti simultaneously attributes agency to both women and shows the equivalence between material wealth and the female body: Phoola breaks the "secure seams" of the house by leaving with what the family considered its own wealth, and Mitro does so by making her body available to other men, thus "opening" the "closed" kinship network. In their self-assertions and in their use of a vocabulary of sexuality and individuality, both Mitro and Phoola resemble Begum Urdu, rather than embodying the values of Queen Devanagari.

## 'Folk' language and its margins

We learn early in the narrative that Mitro's marriage into Sardari's family, given her dubious heritage, took place by way of a lie that concealed Mitro's identity as the daughter of a prostitute. Thus, language becomes the basis for the destabilization of the joint family not only through Mitro's profanity, but through a speech act that determines Mitro's very entry into the family. Mitro's disregard for familial relationships is inherently connected to her excessive sexual desire, through which she is defined as a character. Her repeated articulation of her husband's failure to satisfy her sexually is anathema to the rest of the family members, both because it ruptures their veneer of respectability, and because it questions the son Sardari's virility. Mitro's desire, however, is impervious to any such notions of respectability. While Sobti as well as other critics have read Mitro's desire as informed by a wish for maternal fulfillment that places her squarely within the patriarchal economy of the joint family, Mitro in fact questions this economy, and seems to place greater value upon her sexual fulfillment than upon her impregnation. In language that recalls her mother Balo's profession, Mitro wonders: "What a strange trade of life and procreation—if your own sons provide the seed, it's a blessing, and if others' sons do, it's a sin!" (Sobti, *MM* 51).

Mitro's use of language frequently overflows with jokes and innuendos, particularly directed towards the joint family's regulation of sexuality. Although such 'rustic' speech is attributed to almost all characters in the novella, Mitro's unfulfilled sexual desire invests her speech with a libidinal charge that proliferates language to the point of chaos. Thus, in her speech, terms that reflect the hierarchy of patriarchal kinship—*jeth, jithani, sasu ma* (brother-in-law, co-sister-in-law, mother-in-law)—fail to exert the authority that they should, or to regulate the flow of desire in directions conducive to the maintenance of patriarchal order. In Mitro and Balo's anarchic world, the patriarch can be tricked, brothers-

in-law and sons-in-law can be desired, mother and daughter can spar about sex, and Mitro can come dangerously close to sleeping with the man who may have been her own father. Mitro's speech embodies the very "shamelessness" for which she is chastised early in the narrative by Sardari.

In an interview, Sobti describes the prototype of Mitro's character as "a living, breathing garden of trembling flowers" (Sobti, *Lekhak* 14). In her description of an undeveloped "photographic negative" of Mitro, Sobti draws on nature for images that help her articulate a romantic rusticity, within which both the prototype and Mitro become extensions of an "earthy" landscape (*Lekhak* 14). In Sobti's discussion of *Mitro Marjani* as well as in the novella, this landscape comes to represent the fecundity of both a folk idiom and land figured in terms of the feminine body. Thus, Mitro herself is described as "a lively river" (*nad-nadiya si khuli-duli bahu*) (66). Throughout the narrative, Sobti makes extensive use of a folk or rural idiom that lacks standardized spellings and grammar (*jithani* instead of *jethani*, *na mar* instead of *mat mar*) and that brings together colloquial Hindi [*jis din se is ghar ko paaon rakha hai, meri jaan ko ban aayi hai* (Ever since I set foot in this house, my life has been under threat)] with Panjabi [*bhali-changi, gabru jawan* (well and good, strapping young man)], and at times with Urdu [*Dhanwanti ne bebasi se imdad ke liye bete ki or dekha* (In her desperation Dhanwanti looked to her son for support)]. In doing so, she draws upon speech registers specific to regions that straddled Partition borders. The text is also infused with an orality that is visible (and audible) in its use of repetition, alliteration, and irregular grammar ["*Phoolavanti sir peet-peet dahadne lagi*" (Phoolavanti beat her head with her hands and bemoaned her fate); "*nirakh-parakh*" (lovingly gazed); "*kivadon ki viralon se chhan-chhan aata bahu-bete ke kamre ka ujiyala*" (the light filtering through curtains and filling her son and daughter-in-law's room)]. Sobti frequently describes this language of "the folk" as an "organic," or "natural" phenomenon, once again employing metaphors drawn from nature. Much like her earlier description of the 'prototype' of Mitro, these metaphors too make language coextensive with the maternal female body. Much like in the work of the 'regional' realist writer Phanishwarnath Renu, in Sobti's work too, non-standard Hindi serves the purpose of reinvigorating the memory of an idyllic pre-Partition motherland where prosperity flowed uninhibited, and where religions, languages, and land were undivided by borders. Defending her use of such a non-standard idiom in a later novel, *Zindaginama,* Sobti states in an interview: "The Partition had taken its final shape, and I wished to preserve the music and the sounds of an earlier time within these pages" (Sobti, *Lekhak* 125).

However, if the language of 'rusticity' and 'the folk' recalls a land without borders, it is also used to lay down boundaries. Thus, the Hindi of the folk on the one hand proliferates and destabilizes in the hands of Mitro, Balo, and Phoola, and on the other, contains, segregates and prescribes in the hands of the patriarch Gurudas, the mother-in-law

Dhanwanti, and Suhag. This tendency of language to contain becomes most visible in the persistence of casteism in the narrative. As Poonam Tushamad points out in her essay, the text is riven with instances where lower castes' titles are used as derogatory terms. Referring to Sobti's repeated use of the titles of certain lower castes in proximity to the word "garbage," Tushamad argues that "Krishna Sobti finds it quite suitable to refer to *chuhras* and *chamars* after referring to 'garbage' because she knows that these castes, historically, are associated with the labor of cleaning, and are considered low in society." This casteism, which features generously in the characters' speech, becomes particularly visible in the text's treatment of Mitro's mother, Balo. Mitro's visceral reaction to her mother towards the end of the narrative takes specifically racist/casteist tones, and presents numerous instances of casteism towards Balo: the house is characterized as a graveyard or "*masaan*," a cremation ground where people of the Dom caste perform the spiritual but outcaste labor of burning the dead. The fear evoked by Balo's face is associated primarily with the color of her skin, her comparison to a snake associates her with the lowest rung of creatures in the Hindu chain of being, and Mitro compares her to a demoness and to a "priestess of evil," mythical figures into which outcastes have frequently been transmuted. As Tushamad shows, *Mitro Marjani* frequently uses the names of untouchable castes that perform menial labor in the form of slurs. Thus, even though Mitro frequently criticizes and mocks Phoola, Dhanwanti's reference to Phoola's family members as "*bhishti*"—a caste of Dalit sanitation workers—is considered an insult grievous enough for Mitro to protect Phoola from it. It is thus in the interweaving of those names within the Hindi spoken by upper-caste yet 'rough' characters that their nature as casteist is revealed. While Sobti's use of casteist language is one aspect of her use of a folk idiom, it also shows the surfacing of a casteism that otherwise remains repressed in normative forms of Hindi that are implicitly upper-caste.

At the same time, it is not only through a language of caste that the text punishes Balo for belonging to the margins of the patriarchal economy that Mitro now inhabits the center of. Mitro ultimately abandons her mother as well as her questionable caste background before she relinquishes herself to the patriarchal joint family. As such, Balo becomes the point of intersection of the failure of the novel's linguistic experiments and the limits of its exploration of female autonomy. As an illustration of the impossibility of female autonomy, Balo comes to represent an unresolvable conflict in "Mitro Marjani": although she possesses both sexual and financial autonomy, the climax of the novella invests her with a longing for incorporation into what we can now see as an upper-caste heteronormativity. It also reveals her autonomy as circumscribed by a patriarchal objectification of feminine youth and beauty, both of which Mitro possesses and Balo lacks. The narrative of Mitro's supposed autonomy is thus revealed as built on the foundation of her youth as well as her circumscription, however tenuous, by a casteist patriarchy.

## Autonomous intimacies

In her use of non-standard forms of Hindi in *Mitro Marjani*, Sobti draws on the work of Phanishwarnath Renu, whose Hindi was well-known for "encompassing dialects such as Avadhi, Bhojpuri, and Maithili in their modern and medieval forms, Bengali, Nepali, tribal language, as well as Sanskritized Hindi, Bazar Hindustani, English, and Urdu" (Hansen 282). In an analysis of Renu's "heteroglossia," Kathryn Hansen argues that, by using non-standard Hindi, Renu referenced Hindi texts that preceded the standardization of Hindi, such as the work of eighteenth-century poets Tulsidas and Kabir, thus harking back to a "simpler period, purer in spirit (at least in the imagination) to the present age" (278). Although Sobti's Hindi in "Mitro Marjani" shows the clear influence of Renu's use of dialect in his "regional" literature, it evades placement in the same category, which "took location as its driving force" (Gajarawala 99). Instead, "Mitro Marjani"'s depiction of the joint family independent of references to place or time lend to it an element of timelessness, and characters stand on the border between individuals and character-types. This liminality of characters is in fact significant to the short story's representation of a historical moment when the joint family was transitioning into nuclear and fragmented forms of relationality.

This liminality begins with the interiority of Gurudas and Dhanwanti. Unlike the realist novel where interiority is placed in the service of a linear evolution, Gurudas and Dhanwanti become mute spectators of the dissolution of their family. While Mitro is not attributed a similar narrative voice, we see that her disregard for familial relationships is accompanied by a lens of individuality through which she is able to display and experience affection and appreciation for her family members. Additionally, Mitro's autonomous, non-reproductive sexuality is accompanied by an intimacy with Sardari despite his impotence. This intimacy and desire for Sardari transcends the legitimized forms of intimacy that structure the joint family, such as Suhag's and Sardari's sister Janko's sexual relations with their husbands, which are oriented towards childbearing, and Suhag's performance of duties towards her mother-in-law and father-in-law. These legitimized forms of intimacy are embedded in the physical spaces of the house, where Dhanwanti, as the mother-in-law, can spy on her sons' rooms. As opposed to this, Mitro's intimacy with Sardari is located in her expressions of desire and affection for him.

In "Mitro Marjani," Sobti's use of the oral, folk idiom is used to simultaneously re-create in compact form a feudal landscape as well as a modernity that is gradually altering that landscape—for instance, Mitro's marital family, around which the narrative is set, does not perform agricultural work but belongs to the same merchant class within which "Queen Devanagari" is located. If non-standard Hindi is used in "Mitro

Marjani" to evoke a pre-Partition world wherein the fertile and undivided land is comparable to the sustenance-providing body of the mother, it also represents an unremitting sexual desire and the failure of bearing a child. In other words, the Hindi of "Mitro Marjani" is embedded in a changing, semi-urban landscape, and its representation of maternal femininity is subordinated to and contrasted with a non-reproductive femininity. Thus, we see that although the narrative generously presents Suhag, Mitro's older co-sister-in-law, as a picture of normative femininity, that picture is contrasted with Mitro and Phoola, who despite—or perhaps because of—their flaws make the patriarchal authority of the joint family a subject of ridicule, anger, and questioning.

While Mitro's return to her husband in response to her mother's seemingly demonic cry for help brings her back into the fold of the normative family, the joint family has by this time been destabilized by the demands for autonomy made by Mitro and Phoola. In these representations of female self-assertion, *Mitro Marjani* shows us the emergence of a citizen-subject who is no longer defined by older networks of kinship, but rather as an individual. However, by making this citizen-subject a woman, Sobti not only draws the woman out of her definition through patriarchy, but also surfaces the fragmentation of older networks of kinship that relied upon the woman's body, particularly its reproductive labor, for cohesion. Sobti's emphasis here upon wealth and sexuality as parallels points towards the sexual economy of the patriarchal joint family for which the reproductive labor and paternal wealth become resources that the woman brings to the joint family for the purpose of increasing its store and perpetuating its name. Yet the control of these resources in the hands of Mitro and Phoola also destabilizes the same economy and threatens to put it out of order. Mitro's sexuality and her voice mirror each other in their excess, while Mitro herself refuses to participate in what Das calls the "orderly exchange of women"—both because she steps out of the threshold of the joint family to fulfil her desire, and because her sexual desire remains, for the duration of the narrative, non-reproductive (21).

## Conclusion

Speaking of literary records of Partition, Sobti states that "it is necessary to look past the barbarism of the present, it is important to save that which has remained untouched by violence" (Sobti, *Lekhak* 26). While she emphasizes the need to rewrite history as more than a record of violence, in other interviews, Sobti also notes that language itself is a historical record of reality, and that the appearance of language in multiple registers in her texts reflects an existing reality that cannot be encompassed in a standardized register. In its portrayal of feminine autonomy, *Mitro Marjani* undermines the association of Hindi with Hindu patriarchal cultural nationalism, even as it mirrors the nationalist mapping of linguistic and cultural identities upon the female body. The embodiment of

a fluidity of languages and cultures questions the drawing of communal borders and the circumscription of feminine agency. Sobti's experimental Hindi highlights the ways in which the language operated in the public sphere through an encoding of the national identity. By undermining those dominant codes of Hindi and inserting different forms of feminine autonomy within them, Sobti reimagines both the language and the nation signified by it.

Sobti's novella ruptures the connections between the female body, the language of nationalism, and a dominant nationhood embedded within Hindi by its dominant forms. Her Hindi is one that at times disrupts and at others unquestioningly represents dominant forms of mapping borders upon femininity, land, and language. "Mitro Marjani" questions Partition violence by freeing language from its 'official' shackles to represent an unrestrained and unreproductive feminine sexuality. As a protagonist, Mitro presents a non-reproductive as well as a sexually desiring female subjectivity. While the parallelism of her body with land draws on a feudal/patriarchal milieu that was dominant in the nation-state, her narrative invests her with autonomy and resistance to appropriation by a masculine narrative. Thus, in her own version of a parallelism of land, language, and the female body, Sobti makes Hindi representative of a disruptive, fluid femininity, as well as a modern language struggling to locate its autonomy through a new literary idiom, even as the narrative reinstates the normative joint family in its structure, and upper caste dominance in its linguistic experiments.

Like the seminal work of Urvashi Butalia, it is significant that Veena Das' analyses of pain, violence, and language, which are based upon her interviews of survivors of the Partition, center orality as an alternative to the discipline of History, and attempt to locate individual subjects within a narrative of history that surpasses them. Thus, Butalia asks "if there is a way in which people's stories, notwithstanding all their problems, can somehow expand, stretch the definitions and boundaries of history and find a place in it. Is there some way in which history can make space for the small, the individual voice?" (12-13). "Mitro Marjani" can be seen as channelling such an alternate orality of 'the folk.' Ultimately, it is through the centering of female articulations of autonomy that Sobti writes a Hindi that re-envisions the nation as a feminist category.

## Notes

1. See Sukrita Paul Kumar, *Krishna Sobti: A Counter Archive*; Rosine-Alice Vuille, *Krishna Sobti's Views on Literature and the Poetics of Writing*; Rohini, *Ek Nazar Krishna Sobti Par*

2. See also Asha Sarangi, "Languages as Women: The feminisation of Linguistic Discourses in Colonial North India," Gender and History, 2009

3. I rely here on Christopher King's reproduction of parts of the play in his article "Forging a New Linguistic Identity: The Hindi Movement in Banaras."

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