Sexuality outside marriage, public or uncontrolled sexuality, is regarded in South Asia among Hindus and Muslims alike as dangerous and threatening to the social order. One prevalent folk idea, as Vatuk reports (1985: 143), is that women endanger male virility because of their ‘lustful nature’, surplus of blood and (dangerous, hot) sexual desire. The question is: by adopting uncritically this male perspective on female sexuality, are we not disregarding women’s views of male sexuality? Is there not, perhaps, a counter-belief among women that (hot) male sexuality is equally dangerous for women?

To answer this question, the present paper considers critically a series of studies which respond to debates in the scholarly literature about cultural constructions of gender and sexuality in South Asia. I begin with two studies which, I argue, start from diametrically opposed questions, and use somewhat different ethnographic materials to prove their case. Gloria Raheja and Ann Gold in *Listen to the Heron’s Words* focus on women’s sexually explicit folk songs in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh (Raheja and Gold 1994). My own study of the Pakistani *mehndi* pre-wedding ritual and other ritual celebrations, based on fieldwork in Manchester conducted in the decade between 1975 and 1985, while encompassing folk songs, analyses their framing and embeddedness in a wider cosmological set of assumptions that includes the treatment of the bride and groom with magical sub-
stances, ritual clowning and masquerading, joking as well as singing at mehndi rites (Werbner, 1986 and 1990/2002: Chapter 9). The settings are also different: village India and Manchester, England, but many of the assumptions and performative genres are shared in common. At the time of my fieldwork Manchester had a relatively affluent Pakistani population of some 15,000, the majority Punjabis and north Indians, many originating from East Punjab.

Raheja and Gold, in the introductory chapter of their joint book, explain that their study of sexually explicit folk songs and the women who sing them is intended to challenge the widely held colonial and scholarly construction of the Indian ‘Woman’ as ‘a silent shadow . . . veiled and mute’, accepting her subordination to her in-laws, submissive, chaste, sexually repressed, passive and unquestioningly obedient’ (1994: 3-4). Against the Subaltern Studies historians’ view that the subaltern cannot ‘speak’ (Spivak 1988), they suggest that a shift from ‘historical archive to ethnographic inquiry’, and particularly the focus on women’s songs, enables us ‘to grasp the hegemonic discourse on kinship and gender, on the one hand, and women’s subjectivity and agency, on the other’ (Raheja and Gold 1994: 14). That agency, the songs highlight, was not merely, they propose, affirmative of the social order, but questioned and subverted it.

Recent Subaltern Studies historians have argued that gendered constructions of Indian women as defenceless in the face of male abuse were used by British colonial administrators and missionaries to authorise their role in India as defenders of women, vulnerable and coerced by their own society. The 1829 British prohibition of sati, widow immolation, which afforded women a protective mantle, legitimised—so the argument of the new historians goes—their continued colonial presence in India. Against that, however, Mani (1989) has shown that the debate on whether to prohibit sati was located discursively in a colonial discussion of ‘correct’ Brahmanical traditions; it did not focus in the first instance on the barbarism of sati and hence the need to protect defenceless women’s human rights or, more broadly, on Christian ethical principles (1989: 94–5, 116). Instead, the debate on sati was part of a wider colonial attempt to codify personal law, based on traditional texts. The more pragmatic
question for the colonial authorities was whether sati could be ‘safely prohibited through legislation’ without provoking ‘indigenous outrage’ because of its ‘traditional’ authorisation in scripture, or whether it was to be understood merely as an economic strategy deployed by families aiming to rid themselves of the expensive encumberance of widows (1989: 92), and thus unlikely to inflame religious passions.

In a contradictory discourse which stressed women’s unbridled agency, Christian missionaries and colonial administrators were outraged by the apparently loose morals of Indian women. Banerjee (1989) records the horror of the missionaries and colonial officials at the ‘indecent’ public performances of women (p. 149). The growing puritanism of the Bengali elite at the end of the nineteenth century was influenced by Victorian values. Paradoxically, as Raheja and Gold report, Indian nationalists too, while resisting British colonialism, also tended to disapprove of Indian women’s sexually explicit folk culture (see also Kelly 1991 on Fiji). Like the missionaries, they tried to suppress any overt expressions of female sexuality (Banerjee 1989). Gandhi’s asceticism and sexual abstinence set the tone: ‘Gandhian politics gave celibacy a new charge’, John and Nair suggest (1986: 16), while at the same time, paradoxically, sexual ‘repudiation demanded that sexual desire be talked about endlessly’. Gandhi became the ‘eunuch for the nation’. Violence was, in Gandhian cosmology, an ‘ingredient of male desire’ while the ideal woman became the ‘chaste wife’ or celibate widow (ibid.: 17). Indian women, for Gandhi, were the true nationalists, with their silent courage and capacity to endure suffering. Ideally for the nationalists they were supposed to be both civilized, in a Western sense, while being guardians and preservers of tradition. To add to this, Raheja and Gold propose that despite the subaltern studies historians’ critique, they too fail to include women’s voices in their rewriting of colonial history. Alongside them, Western feminists have tended to construct women in India and the global South more generally purely as victims, without capacity to act independently. Such Eurocentric constructions have collectively continued to underline the superiority of the West.

Raheja and Gold’s aim, then, is to recover the indigenous voices
of local Indian women. At the same time, their intention is to highlight the fact that Indian women do not speak with a single voice. On the contrary, their voices reveal ‘multiple perspectives, shifting purposes and reflexive or ironic commentaries’ (pp. 9, 14–15), as Mohanty too has argued (1991: 55). The theoretical framework they deploy draws on James Scott’s notion of hidden transcripts, disguised modes of resistance and counter-hegemonic discourses, which disrupt dominant ideological constructions of gender (Scott 1985, 1990). Scott, it will be recalled, argues that all dominant, hegemonic discourses have their limits. Subordinates see through the claims of superiors even when they dare not challenge them openly.

According to Raheja and Gold, village women do not simply accept cultural constructions of themselves imposed by male relatives. They certainly do not embrace self-abasement. Nor are they silent or mute. Instead, they have their own alternative visions of the world. They compose their own mythologies. These are expressed mainly through the medium of folk songs and tales. The songs challenge patriarchy and male ideas about female sexuality even if, ultimately, they do not have the power to overturn the dominant social order. Indeed, Raheja and Gold report that village women sing their sexually explicit songs openly, within earshot of men. What is not fully taken into account by the two authors, however, and this is the nub of my criticism, is that such songs are sung on prescribed ritual occasions and that the risqué jokes, sexual barbs and mock challenges they articulate are customary expressions of sexual or gendered conflict on framed occasions; that the songs, obscene joking, mocking and masquerading are, in other words, licensed, substantively marked as ‘hot’, and are thus also ontologically transformative. To the extent that the songs move beyond their prescribed ritual moments and come to be secularized as ‘folk’ or performative traditions, they lose this substantive-transformative-ontological capacity, but acquire the capacity for public protest and subversion and thus, perhaps, a place in history.

The customary limits of such counter-resistive expressions in Raheja and Gold’s ethnography are underlined by the fact that the same women who deploy these subversive discourses continue to defend and uphold dominant discourses and the social
The Place(s) of Transgressive Sexuality in South Asia

order in other, everyday contexts. This implies, I suggest, against Raheja and Gold’s disclaimer (1994: 24), that Indian women’s songs of sexuality sung on ritual occasions can indeed be interpreted as ‘rituals of rebellions’ in Gluckman’s terms (1963)—not in terms of their cathartic function, but in the way they transform the ontological condition of participants ritually through the enactment of conflict. Such transformative rituals of rebellion, which usually aim to renew or awaken the fertility of persons or the community, are rituals of *revitalization*. They deploy conflict productively and reproducively to mark, juxtapose, oppose and ultimately unite opposites. This is evident, for example, in McKim Marriott’s account of Holi as a ritual of annual revitalization and ‘love’ which fails to overturn otherwise oppressive hierarchies of gender and caste (Marriott, 1966). As Gluckman argued, such rituals of rebellion challenge figures of authority such as men or chiefs, and express endemic, irresolvable conflicts in the society without threatening the social order or leading to a revolutionary consciousness (although for Gluckman, the possibility of incipient rebellion, if not revolution if the chief was unjust, *was* contained in these rituals). In this respect there is clearly a difference between Indian women who sing sexually explicit songs that mock men specifically on ritual occasions, usually associated with fertility and reproduction, and Indian or Pakistani feminists who challenge traditional laws that discriminate against women and demand from the state that they be reformed or abolished. The feminists deny that men should have more rights than women. They demand a total revolution of the traditional social order. Not so popular folk songs.

Raheja and Gold gloss over the key fact that rituals of rebellion are expressions of everyday conflicts that do not lead to radical social rupture or change. They are ‘framed’ events in Goffman’s terms, performed in especially set-apart spaces, and are often, paradoxically, rituals convened to affirm cosmic fertility and to renew the social order. So too, the women studied by Raheja and Gold sing sexually transgressive songs which challenge men and openly refer to copulation on specific festivals or rituals of fertility and reproduction, such as Holi. Although they sometimes sing these songs on other occasions, just for fun, this is usually done in private, with only women around. At the
same time, since such rituals express conflicts in everyday life, it seems fair to assume, as Raheja and Gold propose, that they do create subjective reflexivity and consciousness of an alternative social order. Equally persuasive is the fact that while being integral to some ritual moments, obscene singing and joking can also be performed ‘out of frame’, on the sidelines of events, obliquely subverting a central official message (Goffman 1974: Chapter 7). A major strength of the authors’ analysis is their argument that the songs women sing are not merely ‘texts’ to be interpreted but positioned performances enacted from particular locations (1994: 147–8; Raheja 1995: 50). In this respect the authors arguably succeed in creating a bridge between postcolonial and subaltern studies and anthropological ethnographic analysis.

*Listen to the Heron’s Words* certainly shows that women valorize sexuality in their folk songs and use sexual insults on ritual occasions. But the book’s aim is to go further and argue against split representations of women in South Asia which image them as divided into two types. In popular Hindu mythologies women’s sexuality is often depicted as dangerous and bad, while motherhood is constructed as fertile, good and nurturing. Split representations of women, common in South Asia, draw a contrast between a fertile but chaste nurturing mother, imaged as a cow, and an erotic but barren bad mother, imaged as a mare (O’Flaherty 1980). Against this, Raheja and Gold propose that Indian women are not split between the ideal and the real. They actually have a unitary sense of identity, one which encompasses both sex and motherhood. It could be argued, however, that because the authors start their analysis by rejecting the image of the chaste Indian women, in the final analysis they end by privileging women’s sexually outrageous bawdiness, which stands in stark contrast to their public chastity and obedience. In effect, then, Raheja and Gold ultimately retain the opposition between discourses of sexuality and chastity.

A key reason, in my view, why Raheja and Gold can only reproduce a new version of such female split images arises from their exclusive focus on textual or discursive material at the expense of the silent language of symbolic, material and bodily substances. To take a contrastive example: in my work on *mehndi*
rituals among Punjabi Muslims (Werbner 1986; 1990/2002: chapter 9), I attempt to probe the integration of sexual obscenities, joking, singing and masquerade in the cosmological and symbolic logic underlying such split representations, in order to demonstrate that they are part of a single unified idea about the cosmos.

My starting point for the ritual analysis is an indigenous cultural dilemma: how, in real life, can one achieve fertility without sexuality? The answer to this question is pitched first and foremost against the alternative indigenous folk construction of women in South Asia (and, indeed, in many Muslim societies where women are defined as potential sources of *fitna*, disorder) cited at the outset of this paper, one which highlights not their essence as sexually repressed victims but as sexually wild, hot and dangerously promiscuous, closer to nature than to culture and thus in need of domestication and control. Linked to this is the indigenous view that men legitimately control the public sphere, that is, the public domain of culture. By contrast, women are necessarily restricted to the domestic domain—being essentially close to nature as a result of their association with body fluids—menstruation, child bearing, cooking and child socialization. Being natural, women are barred from the public domain of culture. According to scholarly work drawing on this set of indigenous oppositions, the wedding ritual aims to control women’s wild sexuality and establish male dominance over the bride (see, for example, Selwyn 1979).

Against this interpretation, my analysis starts from the fact that for South Asians, human sexuality is desired. In marriage, it is good and fertile. Uncontrolled, outside marriage, it is regarded as disorderly, hot and threatening to the social order. This view creates a paradox, a cultural dilemma, at the transitional moment of marriage. Pakistanis keep young virgins in purdah, protected from any contact with marriageable young men. Hence the moment of marriage is the moment of total exposure to what was previously strictly taboo, namely sex. The virginal bride is, I argue, too cultural, not natural enough. Her natural desires and sexual instincts have been kept under cultural lock and key. They have to be released and her exposure to a total stranger must be effected culturally before the marriage is consummated.
My interpretation draws on north Indian ideas about nature and fertility. Pakistanis believe that fertility in nature is a combination of heat and cold—of sun and rain—that is, it is always a balanced mixture (see Beck 1969). So too human fertility must combine and balance these features of hot and cold. Unlike humans, animals in nature can be sexuality uncontrolled and still reproduce, but in human society such uncontrolled sexuality is regarded as extremely dangerous—it is too hot and therefore, rather than bringing fertility, it is believed that it causes infertility. Heat is also associated with pollution, hence sex has to be cooled and purified. In the wedding mehndi the women who manage the ritual seek to juxtapose the heat of sex with coolness in order to make the bride and bridegroom’s sex safe and fertile. The operation of symbolic substances goes towards achieving this combination of hot and cold substances for the sake of human fertility. Paralleling and reinforcing this symbolic manipulation are sexually explicit songs and androgynous masquerading (or cross-dressing) which are ‘hot’, much like the ritual substances. This makes evident why a singular focus only on the songs is inadequate. They have to be grasped in the broader context of the juxtapositions and processual ontological transformations effected through the ritual.

To understand north Indian wedding rituals, including wedding songs and insults, it is thus essential to recognize differentiations across the life course: ‘Indian women’ do not form a single category, as Raheja and Gold too argue, but without seeing the full implications of their argument. It is certain categories of women—young virgins—who are expected to be totally chaste and non-sexual, mute and submissive. Kept in seclusion, purdah, it is, above all, the sexuality and fertility of virgins and young brides that must be managed ritually, and it is they who must be protected from the hot sexuality of the opposite sex, of the male bridegroom. Wedding songs are part of an elaborate ritual process which also uses food and other magical substances, as well as transgressive joking, erotic dancing and clowning in the women’s quarters, to effect a transformation in the condition of both the bride or bridegroom. Both boy and girl have to be made into sexual, and potentially fertile, human beings.
We see this in the mehndi, the henna mixture which is smeared on the bride and bridegroom. The mehndi is an anomalous, self-contradictory substance, and as such it is a ritual transformer. The henna is a green leaf which is mixed with water and lemon and in that wet stage it is said to be extremely cold. Its touch to the skin is very cold. But when it dries on the skin and is washed off a few hours later, it turns red, dark red. Red is a hot colour associated with blood and hence also with life and with the blood of childbirth. This is an iconic feature of redness - it stands for blood and all the ambiguities of life and death associated with blood. But in its quality as heat the mehndi substance is a symbolic shifter; it shifts the bride from cold to heat. This is underlined by the fact that her hennaed hands are passed over a hot oven after which she is not allowed to wash. The heat produced is, however, not a polluting and dangerous heat because it is a heat framed in coldness.

The same logic applies to the obscene joking and ritual clowning and masquerading that occur during the mehndi ritual. The young girls, friends of the bride often dress up as male figures adorned with beards and attired in ridiculous looking old clothes. Such clowns are prone to making sexy and obscene gestures and remarks. They are clearly regarded as very hot, figures of disorder which appear suddenly and just as suddenly vanish. The clown performs in front of the bride who sits in the corner, sad and crying, while her friends decorate her hands and feet with beautiful henna designs. The vulgarity of the performance is greeted by all the women, except the bride, with gales of laughter.

But older women too engage in sexual repartee, indicating, as Sylvia Vatuk has argued, that older, sexually experienced women do not become less sexual with age. On the contrary, ‘the widely reported belief in South Asia [is] that sexual intercourse with an older woman is far more dangerous for a man’ (Vatuk 1985: 144). There is no ritual marking of the menopause and the key distinction is between the virgin (kanya), the married woman whose husband is living, and the widow (ibid.: 145). An example of joking involving older women during the wedding is the following dialogue, in which the ‘clown’, a young woman dressed up as a disgusting old man, attacked the bride’s mother:
Old man: ‘Give me your daughter!’
Mother: ‘You can take me’.
Old man: ‘You’re too old!’
Mother: ‘Look at you, you’re old too’!

On another occasion, the bride’s older sister commented on the inexperience of the groom, having successfully pulled off his shoe: ‘I can manage a lot stronger than this one [i.e. the groom]. He was only born yesterday’!

Let us remind ourselves of the central dilemma implicit in the wedding ritual. Pakistanis want their daughters to be sexually active and fertile, and to enter into a successful, happy marriage. But sex is hot and dangerous. Moreover, male sex is particularly hot and dangerous. On the other hand, for men the blood of menstruation is polluting, hot and dangerous. So when they consummate their marriage, the bride and groom are effectively endangering each other. They need to be purified and made cold. But they also need to be heated up. Both these aims have to be achieved simultaneously.

My argument—that just as women are conventionally regarded as dangerous by men so too are men regarded as dangerous by women—draws support from Laura Ring’s analysis of out-of-control ‘hot’ ‘anger’ among Sindhis and Punjabis in Pakistan. In her ethnography of a Karachi apartment building Ring found a prevalent attitude among women that ‘Male anger is seen as immune to discipline or reform. Because of its boundless destructive potential, this anger is to be tactically avoided as much as possible—and failing that, it must be endured’ (Ring 2006: 110). From women’s perspective, male anger is intimately associated with blood and the physical ‘transgression of limits—in particular, the breaching of bodily boundaries’ (ibid.). Yet they socialize their sons in ways that encourage this expression of anger which is associated also with masculinity and ordering capacities.

Even in Manchester, the rites before and during the wedding retain their force so long as Pakistani Punjabis continue to keep young virgins in purdah and to believe that disordered sexuality is dangerous. But the ritual does more than change the physical or ontological constitution of the person. It is also reflexive and
The Place(s) of Transgressive Sexuality in South Asia

indexical in very specific ways even beyond gender. For example, in Manchester the transgressive joking during the mehndi comments on the current condition of the ethnic community in Britain. Jokey gifts highlight the general promiscuity and easy availability of sex in British society. The gifts thus also create a sense of boundary between the immigrant-settler community, which is much stricter with its young girls, and the rest of the society.

Second, the ritual clown is used by the girls and the women more generally to challenge certain Pakistani customs such as arranged marriages. The clown is a combination of male and female, young and old, an androgynous figure, a transvestite. Performatively, ‘he’ is used to comment on relations between men and women, young and old. Here the particular congregation attending the wedding rites and the particular issues bothering them are crucial. In some weddings there may be an attack through the clown on the older generation’s arrangement of a marriage between a young girl and an older man, a union considered disgusting by most young girls. In other weddings, the antagonism between the sexes is highlighted. Women mock men.

Yet not all the women participate in the joking. In particular the bride remains silent, ‘ashamed’ and weeping because she is leaving home. She enjoys the joking while pretending not to look. It is the rest of the women who celebrate sexuality.

The specificities of the verbal play are thus highly indexical and embedded in symbolic practices which are customary and draw on cosmogonic ideas about human and natural fertility in very specific ways. Because the sexuality of men and women is mutually dangerous, the bride and bridegroom are treated in complementary ways. Both are smeared with henna to make them hot on a background of coolness. In addition, the boy has milk poured over his head and is given milk to drink. The girl is fed with nuts which symbolise semen. The young girls and women stuff the boy’s mouth with mithai (South Asian sweets). The transition in the wedding for the groom is from being nurtured by his mother to being nurtured by his wife—who also nurtures him sexually. There is in the ritual thus a play on ideas of nurture and sexuality. The boy has to be separated from his mother so that he can receive both the sexual services and the nurturing services of his future wife.
The *mehndi* ritual also underlines the fact that women control the domestic domain. In their hazing of the bridegroom, they are making clear to him that in this domain his wife will be dominant and he will have to submit to her authority. The ritual clown invades the domestic domain and threatens to disrupt it. The women take the power of nature-as-fertility that the clown represents, just as they take the natural substance of the *mehndi*, and then they cast the ritual clown out. The bride and bridegroom are left in a condition of cool heat, safe sexuality, which is associated with fertility.

To sum up, then: like Raheja and Gold’s analysis of sexually transgressive songs in *Listen to the Heron’s Words*, my analysis of the wedding ritual in *The Migration Process* denies the tendency in the scholarly literature on South Asia to stress split constructions of women as being either totally chaste or totally promiscuous. Both works recognise the power and agency of women in their own right, and their control over their bodies and sexuality. But I interpret this control as embedded in complex ideas about the cosmos, nature and regeneration, which are based on the notion of balance, the juxtaposition of opposites. For married women, among Muslims, there is no contradiction between sex, fertility and happiness, as long as these occur within marriage.

Ultimately, however, my point is also that women manoeuvre within real limits. Folk traditions do not make women revolutionaries even if they make them perpetual subversives of male pretensions of control. In the women’s view, men’s sexuality is dangerous, especially for innocent young women. So too, through domestic rituals women set limits to male arbitrary domination. They assert their dominance in the domestic sphere and over their husbands in it.

**FROM RITUAL TO SECULAR POPULAR CULTURE**

The singing, dancing, joking and masquerade in the *mehndi* rituals I observed, although drawing on a customary archive, was relatively spontaneous, a dramatic production staged by the bride givers, bride receivers, and their friends. But in Pakistan as in the rest of South Asia, certain social categories or professional castes
perform more formalized, explicitly sexual dramatic roles during life-cycle rituals. Among these the khusra (elsewhere known also as hijra), cross-dressing effeminate males, sometimes castrated or hermaphrodites, who usually live in a group with other khusre, play ‘an impure but a very auspicious role’ paralleling that of the ritual clown (Pfeffer 1995: 31). Their main role is to perform at weddings and at the birth of a son. Pfeffer comments that ironically, ‘emasculated dancers without sex or gender guarantee virility of Punjabi men and fertility of women and lineages’. Theirs is a ‘regenerative power’ (1995: 34), but they also have the power to curse if not remunerated. He interprets their performance as a ‘sacrifice’; the khusre lacking sex, are ‘sex givers’ (p. 35), but it seems to me more plausible to argue that the unstable mixture of male and female which the khusra dramatises and embodies is the source of ‘her’ auspiciousness and fertility.

Hijre or khusre are not the only social category to perform auspicious dances in front of respectable elite audiences during religious festivals. Writing about urban Calcutta in the nineteenth century, Banerjee reports that a range of women sung of adultery and love, ridiculed male hypocrisy, irresponsibility and cowardice, and dealt with love affairs in a ‘ribald’ manner which was ‘condemned as obscene by the educated Bengali gentry and finally banished from “respectable” society by the end of the century’ (1989: 137). The kheur songs sung by women were often openly erotic, playful and bawdy; they expressed ‘hearty unashamed appetite’ (139). Banerjee interprets these ritual performances in political terms—as a ‘challenge’ to orthodoxy, an ‘oblique criticism’ of Brahmanical purist conventions (139), affording women a ‘dissenting space’, a ‘symbolic solace’ or ‘revenge’ (140). Such ritualistic displays, Banerjee suggests, ‘could widen the behavioural options for women’ or ‘encourage disobedience’ of the ‘lower orders’ (141). One is reminded of the transgressive behaviour of the woman saint-renouncer, Mira Bai: her association with male ascetics, her singing and dancing, and her merging at death with the (male) stone image of Krishna, draped in her sari, may be the mystical source of her fertility (Harlan 2001). Clearly, however, whatever auspicious ontological transformations the women’s singing effected, as ritual perfor-
mannes its specific contextualised, framed effect within rituals or religious festivals, is glossed over in the feminist subaltern literature in favour of an ideological stress on women’s resistance. Such transgressive women form part of an Indian feminist narrative of decline from a golden age which John and Nair (1998: 11–12) identify as nostalgia for a time when courtesans and other women performers led socially autonomous lives.

Banerjee’s interpretation is linked perhaps also to an important transition that occurred in nineteenth century Calcutta: the secularisation of ritual and religious poetry as these were increasingly deployed in dramatic and theatrical performances before audiences (142). In 1891 there were 17,023 actresses, singers, dancers and their accompanists in Calcutta (132). Women formed troupes and parodied religious poems. They invoked the lifestyles of prostitutes and other secular themes. Working women composed ‘doggerels’ grounded in their daily experiences rather than ‘social problems’, such as sati (145–6). They drew on folk humour, bawdy quips and profanities (146). Although these ‘obscene’, ‘licentious and immoral’ performances were banned by over-zealous, puritanical Indian elites at the turn of the twentieth century, they resurfaced in a new form in Indian cinema, a point I return to below.

In Manchester, the move from the inner sanctum of women’s mehndi rituals to more public events has been evident in the fund-raising performances of a women’s group in Manchester, Al Masoom. During chand rat, the ‘night of the moon’ on the last day before Id, the organization held parties in Manchester to celebrate the end of the Ramzan fasting period. During these parties, the ritual singing of romantic love songs and erotic dancing signalled the imminent return to everyday sexuality and nurture. The ritual moment was clearly defined—a movement from sexual abstinence towards renewed fertility and growth.

In Pakistan chand rat is a street festival in which girls and women paint their hands with mehndi and buy each other bangles and jewellery. Jewellery bazaars stay open well after midnight. Here, for example, is a blog from Karachi:

One of the highlights of Ramazan in Karachi is Chand Raat—the entire city doesn’t seem to go to sleep until 6 AM, and there’s this mad shopping frenzy in the air, combined with this city-wide spirit to
just aimlessly stroll the streets and take in the sights and sounds. What are your Chand Raat rituals—do you do the same thing every year, or has the excitement worn off as you got older? (http://karachi.metblogs.com/2005/10/31/chand-raat/)

Another blog describes the sexual undertones of the festival, echoing the mehndi:

Mehendi [sic] sites are numerous and usually crowded to the brim with girls having their hands painted, on this night it also appears as if the bachelor guys ensure that families cannot have a respectful walk around. I wish I could wrap these guys up and ship them to gawadar for one night, as I feel they have no moral values, and tend to be a far bigger nuisance value destroying the spirit of the event. (http://karachi.metblogs.com/2005/11/04/chand-raat-celebration/)

In one sense the particular parties held by Al Masoom in Manchester were simply an organizational strategy for generating female solidarity by drawing on familiar popular cultural resources, variations on customary rituals such as the mehndi, transposed into a new context of voluntary activism. Nevertheless, seen against the background of the attempt by the women's association to assert its right to fund raise for philanthropic causes and assume its rightful place along with men on ceremonial occasions attended by Pakistani and local British dignitaries, and in public meetings held in Manchester (Werbner 2002: Chapter 10), the sexually explicit dancing and singing in the privacy of all-women celebrations took on new connotations. In particular, it revealed the ambivalence experienced by north Indian women who are public activists in their approach to a male-dominated world. The songs sung celebrated men not as enemies but as lovers. They invoked romantic love as well as sexuality, even if they did so in order to empower women as a solidary, exclusive, gendered community of committed activists. The secret and closed nature of the dancing and singing in the chand rat parties expressed this ambivalence. In their public actions, the women were willing to enter into open confrontation with men and to criticise them publicly. Yet in the privacy of the women's quarters the significance of the hidden transcripts sung customarily on ritual occasions was reversed: rather than being forms of counter-hegemonic resistance, they revealed the con-
tinuous valorization of sexual desire and a nostalgic yearning for romantic love.

Paradoxically, perhaps, the more that modern, contemporary Pakistani mehndis come to be opened up to young men as well as women, the more prettified and romanticized they become. In the few such ‘mixed’ mehndis I know of (one I attended in Pakistan, others I watched on video), there was a marked absence of sexually explicit episodes of joking and masquerade by the girls and women present. This is evident also in Indian movies ‘for the family’, marked by a lack of ‘vulgarity’, a mere hint at backstage eroticism, with the ‘bawdy folk tradition of women’s songs’ ‘sanitised’ for mixed audiences (Uberoi 2006: 148; John and Nair 1998: 30–1).

In a further move towards secularizing the sexual themes of the mehndi, Al Masoom put on a series of amateur dramatic performances for women only, as part of its fund-raising events. These routinely included a fashion show, dancing, poetry and Koran reading. Most of the plays, written by the charismatic leader and her daughter, included mehndi staged performances in which the women sang, danced and dressed up as men. The plays’ social messages parodied men and satirised them along with other stock figures of fun: the over-authoritative mother-in-law, hypocritical religious clerics, greedy men and awkward diasporic male visitors from England to Pakistan (the shows were held in Manchester).

CONTEMPORARY SEXUAL PURITANISM
IN INDIA AND PAKISTAN

Nineteenth-century missionaries, colonial officials and elite reformists combined forces to clamp down on overt expressions of female sexuality by professional performers, even when their performances took place in the seclusion of the women’s quarters (Banerjee 1989; John and Nair 1998), but they did not succeed in banishing these performances entirely, as Raheja and Gold’s book and the work of other anthropologists has illustrated. Ordinary women continue to perform these songs, dances and masquerade during the rites preceding weddings and other religious festivals. So too, expressions of erotic sensuality have
The Place(s) of Transgressive Sexuality in South Asia

been incorporated, albeit in sanitized forms, into the expanding Indian cinema. By the late twentieth century protests by sex workers and movements for alternate sexualities became increasingly overt and public in India (John and Nair 1998: 33–6).

Countering such growing contemporary public exposures of sexual transgression and desire, however, has been a new wave of Hindu nationalists and (some) feminists. Even Marxists, who have allowed women greater public visibility, impose on them a strict moral code (ibid.: 32–3). Women’s movements in India have fought against sexual violence and victimization, but unlike the rural Rajasthani, Punjabi and north Indian women described by anthropologists, only recently have they ‘opened up spaces for talking about female desire’ (ibid.: 9).

A more concerted attack on female sexuality has come from the BJP’s anti-obscenity drive, demanding increased censorship of film and media images (Fernandes 2001: 158). Fernandes reports that the Hindutva ‘platform was concentrated on the supposed contamination of the purity of Indian culture, embodied in the potential threat to the purity of women’s sexuality’. The BJP-dominated Maharashtra state prohibited dancing women and waitresses employed in Mumbai’s clubs and bars from working after 8.30 in the evening, which led, in turn, to mass protests by the women whose livelihoods were threatened (ibid.: 158–9). But the BJP moralist discourse of ‘protection’ was not restricted to them: it was also taken up by the press and media (160). So too, Lambert discusses the difficulty encountered by public HIV-Aids educators in India attempting to discuss sexual intimacy explicitly outside highly prescribed contexts (Lambert 2001: 61).

Not only in India itself but in far flung parts of the Indian diaspora, controversies have arisen over public expressions of female sexuality, as in the condemnations in Trinidad of ‘chutney-soca’ in the 1980s and 1990s. This popular genre, drawing on pre-wedding ritual and birth rite songs ‘full of humour and sexual explicitness’, was performed by east Indian women accompanied by young male drummers in front of audiences of up to 10,000 people (Niranjana 1998: 126–7).

In a parallel move, Islamists in Pakistan and throughout the Muslim world have condemned instrumental music and singing,
particularly women’s voices, as well as acting, masquerading and any other overt expressions of sexuality—even in women-only gatherings. In Pakistan, manifestations of sexual transgression are regarded not only as infringing strict Koranic injunctions on female sexuality, but as ‘Hindu’ backsliding. The attempt by Islamists to suppress such ‘Hindu’ expressions may be violent: when Sindhi (Muslim) medical students in Karachi celebrated their examination results by throwing paint on one another in an echo of Holi celebrations, they were attacked by Islamist students as Hindu, and this was followed by riots in the city (Ring 2006: 94–5).

As I have elaborated elsewhere (Werbner 1996, 2002), such attacks by Muslim puritanical (‘fundamentalist’) movements have rendered the space of fun highly contested for Pakistanis. Outside the mosque, a sensual Punjabi aesthetics of music, dance and verbal licence has been defined by the Islamists as unIslamic and sinful, and particularly so with regard to the conduct of women, their sexuality and their right to be visible in public. This is often stressed in relation to veiling. What is less often theorised is the equally doctrinaire redefinition of instrumental music, dance and masquerade (and hence also of ritual celebrations, Hindi films and musical concerts) as sinful, though the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan and more recently in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan has highlighted this tendency in both the Pakistani national and international media and press. Their moral crusade has included the banning of music, films and videos, of posters, billboards and hoardings bearing pictures of women models or film stars, and even of kite flying. Burqa-clad stick-wielding young women Islamist students at the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad, capital of Pakistan, incinerated ‘sinful’ videos and CDs confiscated from local shops in public bonfires. Such iconoclastic zealotry indicates the extremes to which this puritanical movement is willing to go to ban any signs of women, femininity or sexuality—even in the private domain. Its stated aim is to restrict bodily expressions of emotion and desire. Today it is not only Hindus who are targeted but, by analogy, the permissive West.

Hence Chapter 6 of a Deobandi text on etiquette for women
depicts the sinful pleasures associated with customary celebrations:

Everyone knows what sin and evil the dancing of harlots [professional singers and dancers in India who were regarded as prostitutes] entails. All the men look at unrelated women. That is adultery of the eyes. They hear the sound of the women singing and talking. That is adultery of the ears. They talk with these women. That is adultery of the tongue. . . . If dancing is this evil, just think how sinful the people must be who arrange for dances. . . . Moreover, the musicians play various instruments. . . . that too is sin. Hazrat Apostle of God. . . . declared: “My Provider ordered me to destroy these instruments”.

(Metcalf 1990: 95)

Women, the guardians of (allegedly Hinduised) ‘sinful custom’ (as against purified Islamic law) are particularly prone to sin:

Now, as for the dancing arranged for the women [in exclusive female celebrations], you should consider it equally illegitimate, whether there are drums and other instruments or not. Books forbid the performance of monkeys—isn’t it much worse to have people dance? Moreover, the men of the house sometimes catch a glimpse of the dancing, with all the evils described above as a result. Sometimes the [women] dancers sing, and their voices reach the men outside. The men who hear women sing are committing a sin, as are the women responsible for the singing. (ibid.: 95)

Masquerade too is prohibited: ‘Some women put a man’s hat on the head of the dancer. It is sin for a woman to look or act like a man. . . . In short, all the dancing and music that goes on today is a sin’ (ibid.: 95).

Along with singing, dancing and masquerade, ostentatious dress and jewelry are sinful (‘the noble hadis forbids jingling jewellery, because Satan is present in every sound’ (ibid.: 109).

Just as the English Puritans attacked the permissive excesses of Elizabethan England, so too ‘fun’ in the form of music, dance and customary celebration has been delegitimised and marginalised by Muslim reform movements. Their scripturalist zeal is not limited to South Asia. Patrick Gaffney describes how in Upper Egypt, a student musical comedy performance was interrupted: ‘[B]earded militants entered forcibly and took over the stage,
expelling the actors. They declared that the production was not in keeping with Islam and they demanded that it be cancelled completely. In its place, they announced that they would conduct an Islam programme’ (Gaffney 1994: 100).

In similar vein the Islamists prevented the establishment of a cafe on campus because it would encourage ‘idleness and mixing of the sexes’ (ibid.: 103). In revolutionary Iran, too, the sinfulness of dancing, music and especially the cinemas were, Beeman tells us, ‘singled out for harsh attacks from the mosque and religious schools’, and were defined as instruments of Satan, the great tempter (Beeman 1983: 196, 210). Hammoudi reports attacks by Islamists in Morocco on the Berber masquerade ritual of Bilmawn, celebrated after the Great Id. Bilmawn is an androgynous figure. On his back hang a phallus and testicles, on his chest a large, single breast. He is accompanied by several ritual masqueraders representing Jews, with their leader being the rabbi (Hammoudi 1993: 58; see also Werbner 2001). The masqueraders are allowed almost unlimited license. They swear and attack onlookers, enact sexual copulation in public, in front of women, enter the women’s homes while the men of the house are absent, demand or steal food while scattering ash from the sacrificial fire at the mosque, in a ritual of fertility and purification. Objecting to the ritual as bida, unlawful innovation, the Islamists say that ‘... these are customs from before ... these are the jahiliya (ignorance) ... The people are Muslim, and all of a sudden they call themselves Jews and rabbis! It is not possible. And then, someone who imitates a people afterwards belongs to that people!’ (1993: 66).

One could multiply further examples from the contemporary Muslim world. In her recent ethnography of the pietist movement in Egypt, Sabah Mahmood (2005) shows that women embrace voluntarily the normative asceticism of a strict normative Islam. In Britain there has been a marked increase in the number of women adopting the full face veil (niqab)—an indication that Islamic Puritanism has not yet had its day and that women’s wedding popular culture continues to be under siege, with men attempting, often through the agency of women, to control even the inner spaces where mehndis are celebrated in transgressive licence with song, dance, risqué joking and masquerade.
CONCLUSION

The public and private celebration of love, sexuality and fertility by women in South Asia, and in the overseas South Asian diaspora, this paper has shown, has encountered sustained and repeated opposition by a wide range of conservative modernist movements, from Christian missionaries, colonial administrators and Indian nationalists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to Hindutva nationalists, Islamists and even Indian Marxists at the turn of the twenty-first century. The value of anthropological work on north Indian women’s expressive sexuality, as performed in rituals, folk singing and other forms of popular culture, has been to show that, despite this sustained puritanical attack, ordinary South Asian women of all ages continue to assert their right to express sexual desire, to mock men and explore their sexuality through different aesthetic media of song, dance and masquerade. Such expressions of popular culture need, however, to be contextualised, this paper has argued, in a wider cosmology of fertility and auspiciousness that imbues ritually transformative substances, and which frames the clowning, masquerading and joking that occur as episodes within such life course *rites de passage*. The explicit expressions of sexuality during ritual effect an ontological transformation, endowing persons at moments of transition with desired auspiciousness, fertility and reproductive capacity.

NOTES

* This paper was first presented to the Pakistan Workshop in 1999. I would like to thank the participants for their comments. I am also grateful to Karen Leonard for her immensely helpful suggestions.

1. These dialogues are taken from Werbner (1990/2002: Chapter 9). Joking at weddings varies from one place to another but is widely prevalent (see, for example, Fruzetti 1982: 14, 80–1; Kolenda 1990; Yagi 2008; Banerjee 1989: 159). Yaki reports on wedding rituals in Uttar Pradesh that during the nine days of the ceremony, women sing galt (insult or abuse songs) which are divided into two types: one type insults the bridegroom and his relatives while the other has a sexual meaning (Yaki 2008: 40).
REFERENCES


