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Young Girls in Flower:
The Construction of Space in *Fun Home* and
Valmiki's Daughter

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Master's Thesis presented to the Graduate Program in
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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Shani Mootoo's *Valmiki's Daughter*, aiming at an analysis of the construction of space in the narratives. I argue that these narratives share a number of connections not only in thematic aspects and subject matter, but in the emphasis placed in the representation of spatial relations. Both works approach conflicted father-daughter relationships, the experience of same-sex desire, patriarchal family structures and the performativity of gender. Departing from this analogy, I explore how the space of the home and the city manifest themselves and are created in the stories, linking them to wider issues of gender, sexuality and identity. Considering that *Fun Home* belongs to graphic novel genre, my study looks at Bechdel's visual composition and representational practices as an important component of her spatial construction. I make a similar argument for *Valmiki's Daughter* and its use of literary devices and textual organization in relation to how space is constituted. To propose this reading, I draw from a set of critical perspectives that discuss conceptions of the domestic and public spheres to understand the space that the characters in the narratives inhabit. A queer and feminist framework support my investigation on the topic of desire, gendered subjectivities and the expression of sexuality, discussing also its geographic, cultural, historical and political intersections to conclude that subjects in the novel are variously positioned within multiple axes of power and alterity.

Keywords: gender, queer, narrative, space

Resumo

Esta dissertação pretende examinar os romances *Fun Home*, de Alison Bechdel e *Valmiki's Daughter*, de Shani Mootoo, apresentando uma análise sobre a construção do espaço proposta por estas obras. Argumento que as duas narrativas estudadas compartilham uma série de conexões, não apenas no que tange a aspectos temáticos e de enredo, mas na ênfase colocada na representação de relações espaciais. Ambas as obras abordam os conflitos entre pai e filha, a manifestação de desejos homossexuais, estruturas familiares patriarcais e a performatividade de gênero. A partir de tais correspondências, investigo as maneiras em como o espaço da casa e da cidade se manifestam e são articulados nas duas histórias, trazendo questões mais amplas de gênero, sexualidade e identidade. Considerando o caráter gráfico de *Fun Home*, meu estudo investiga a composição visual e as práticas representacionais empregadas pela autora como um componente importante da construção espacial presente na obra. Elaboro um argumento semelhante para *Valmiki's Daughter*, seu uso de dispositivos literários e a organização narrativa em relação à concepção do espaço. Para propor tal leitura, amparo-me em um conjunto de perspectivas críticas e referências textuais de modo a examinar e debater os conceitos estabelecidos sobre esferas domésticas e públicas, e a partir disto, apreender as dinâmicas do espaço habitado pelos personagens das narrativas. Com base em estudos ligados ao feminismo e à teoria *queer*, minha pesquisa aborda questões sobre desejo, subjetividades de gênero e a expressão da sexualidade, discutindo também suas interseções geográficas, culturais, históricas e políticas. Conclui-se afinal que os sujeitos representados por estas obras de ficção estão posicionados de forma diversa entre múltiplos eixos de poder e alteridade.

Palavras-chave: gênero, *queer*, narrativa, espaço

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Introduction

All that has changed along the way is landscape. Implicit in an ending is a beginning destination rendered futile. In any case, as the saying goes, wherever you go, there you are. There you are

(Mootoo, *Valmiki's Daughter* 363)

Fathers and daughters experiencing same-sex desire, domestic turmoil, family dysfunction, patriarchal power relations, performative gender identities, the representation of spatial perspectives. Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home* and Shani Mootoo's *Valmiki's Daughter* share a number of thematic issues, subjects, tropes and narrative elements, such as those mentioned above. Both novels narrate the stories of lesbian daughters and their homosexual fathers in conflict with their sexual identities. The first is an autobiographical graphic narrative that chronicles the memories of Bechdel's life, spanning her early childhood in a small Pennsylvanian town to present day in New York City. Mootoo's narrative, in turn, is a fictional novel whose storyline centers on the Krishnus, a prominent family in the Trinidadian city of San Fernando. In addition to the correspondences listed above, what also links these works together is the ample use of spatial imagery. Occupying a primary position in the narratives, spaces, places and spatial relations are foregrounded as central elements, chief among these being the space of the home and the city. In light of these affinities, this work aims at establishing connections between *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter*, based mainly on the assumption that their points of convergence can lead to a larger discussion on questions of gender, sexuality, identity, agency, mobility,

power, and space.

The “writer is a mapmaker,” states Robert Tally Jr. For the critic, the act of producing narratives is intrinsically spatial. To write is to establish spatial limits, to demarcate territories, to set up boundaries, but also to cross them. It also means to create subjects to inhabit those places, to interact with and articulate themselves within the spaces they are inserted. Cultural texts are the site for constructing, representing, shaping and contesting multiple spaces, voices and identities in relation to wider political, cultural and historical frames.

Published in 2006, the graphic novel *Fun Home* offers an account of Bechdel’s conflicted relationship with her emotionally distant father Bruce, a high-school English teacher who also directs the town’s funeral home, from which the book derives its title. Told in a non-linear, fragmented narrative, the story moves back and forth between episodes in the narrator’s life. Bechdel closely revisits her youth and reassesses the past with a dark sense of humor, delving into her memories, her family relations, her growing up process, her sexuality and her father’s presumed suicide after a request for divorce from her mother. Alison must deal with a gradual awareness of her same-sex attraction while also coming into the discovery that her father too is a homosexual, to the point of having carried out affairs with his students and the male baby sitter. Although Bruce opts for secrecy, Alison decides to explicitly acknowledge her sexuality, an act which prompts her to move out from her parents’ home and embrace her sexual and gender identity.

Alison Bechdel is a North American cartoonist whose artistic production has been closely associated with the lesbian community. She first rose to prominence with her strip series *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which ran in the newspapers for over 20 years. Its relevance

and success is partly due to it being one of the first cartoons to portray non-heterosexual subjects in American popular culture. Bechdel's work has been an influential cultural product for representing the daily life of a group of lesbian women and giving visibility to a rising community outside dominant structures. Aside from *Fun Home*, recently turned into a Broadway musical production, Bechdel published a second autobiographical graphic novel in 2012, *Are you My Mom?*, which focuses mostly on her relationship with her mother.

“If we couldn't criticize my father, showing affection for him was even a dicier venture. We were not a physically expressive family, to say the least. But once I was unaccountably moved to kiss my father goodnight,” says Alison (19). Domestic disharmony and collapsing family ties are one of the foremost issues approached in *Fun Home*. The continuous renovation of the Bechdels' prized Victorian home is the object of Bruce's unrelenting obsession, whose often abusive and withholding actions are the source for much of the household friction. Taking place mostly within the domestic sphere of Bechdel's childhood house, the space of home stands out as a key element in the narrative from its very onset. Chapter 1 from this thesis shows the role the domestic space performs and how it is constructed in the novels. Moreover, I comment on the dual associations carried by the title, discussing how the name in itself contains, and ironically highlights, the ambiguity that comes to define Alison's relation with her father and her home.

To talk about the construction of the spatial realm in *Fun Home* is to inquire about the mechanisms by which this representation occurs. As a graphic medium, Bechdel's narrative process is mediated through images, adding a visual layer to her story and bringing a new dimension to her perception of home. With that particular language of representation, the work provides me with the opportunity to consider the pictorial devices and visual techniques

employed in portraying the domestic space. Throughout this work, I examine Bechdel's composition and visual signifiers, taking a closer look at what the panels illustrate, what is chosen to be brought into focus in the scenes and what the visual information conveys, particularly in regard to images of her father, her relationship with the space of the home and questions of gender identity.

Reflecting about the domestic space and the meaning and symbolism attached to that place calls the wider conceptual issue of home into question, which is discussed in chapter 1. Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, in their analytical study *Home*, develop the notion of the spatiality of home, which they view as a main site for social and affective relations. They claim that "home is both a place/physical location and a set of feelings" (22), explaining that the concept goes beyond materiality and enters the field of perceptions and cultural inscriptions. Home is conventionally idealized and widely understood in terms of being a site of comfort, protection, stability and affection. Chapter 1 aims to include a debate problematizing these discourses. As the guiding trope in Bechdel's work, home and its representation can help me engage in a critical thinking about how these meanings can be contested and how the narratives allow for a resignification of the domestic space.

Drawing from various sources on feminist criticism, chapter 1 demonstrates that questions of identity and power are intimately attached to the concept of home, addressing notions of belonging and displacement. It is also relevant to note the binary construction of home as a gendered space and the association of women with the domestic sphere. Blunt and Dowling argue:

Cutting across the diverse definitions of home used in different frameworks is a recognition that home has something to do with intimate, familial relations

and the domestic sphere. Household and domestic relations are critically gendered, whether through relations of caring and domestic labor, affective relations of belonging, or establishing connections between the individual, household and society. Gendered expectations and experiences flow through all these social relations and their materialities, and gender is hence critical to understanding home. (15)

As private and political overlap, I to point out that home can be a locus of patriarchal dominance and conflict in *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter*, and that domestic relations are often defined by gender inequality. A point that is key to my analysis is the notion that private and public spheres are set in a dialectical relationship to one another, enabling a more open and porous connection that rejects a rigid dichotomous division between the two realms.

Approaching home as bound up within larger domains guides my research towards a study on the space of the city. The second chapter of this thesis elaborates on the representation of the city in the literary works, particularly noticeable in Mootoo's novel. Embedded in the novel's central symbolic structure, the urban area is an essential component of *Valmiki's Daughter*, making the theme a reference present in the narrative framework.

Set in the Caribbean island of San Fernando, Mootoo's novel, from 2008, creates a rich tapestry of places, experiences, and subjects, constructing a fictionalized Trinidad and Tobago through the use of a notably descriptive language. Narrated from two perspectives, the story follows the Krishnus, an upper-class family "of high-calibre Indian ancestry" (Mootoo 20). Valmiki, the father, is a reputable doctor striving to uphold the family name in his community. Viveka, the daughter, is a college student facing the paradox of being simultaneously attached to family bonds and displaced by a restraining social order that

deters her expression of gender and sexuality. Placing emphasis on the dynamics between father and daughter, both of whom struggle with same-sex attraction, *Valmiki's Daughter* establishes a link between kinship, spatial relations and articulation of desires.

Shani Mootoo was born in Ireland to Indian parents, moving shortly after to Trinidad, where she was raised. Her roots and ancestry are multiple, to say the least. Currently based in Toronto, the author is a multi-talented artist who has written fiction and poetry, worked with painting, photography, short films, and video art. Her debut novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, from 1996, also deals with issues of queer desire within a Caribbean culture. Mootoo's literary career comprises six published works, including novels, collections of short stories, and poems: *Out on Main Street* (1993), *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), *The Predicament of or* (2001), *He Drown She in the Sea* (2005), *Valmiki's Daughter* (2009) and *Moving Forward Sideways like a Crab* (2014). Among her recurrent thematic concerns, gender, sexuality, race, identity, belonging, and abuse are at the heart of her creative production, placing the artist as a unique and distinguishing voice in Anglophone Caribbean literature.

The space of the city emerges as dominant in *Valmiki's Daughter*, underlining the connection between literature and geographical thought in the narrative. A second person narrative voice sets the reader on a dizzying quest through the multicultural and overcrowded urban center of San Fernando, progressively directing us upwards from the public space to a residential area where the Krishnus house is located. The main purpose of chapter 2 is to highlight the literary cartographies that are inscribed in the spatial construction in Mootoo's story and to account for its narrative perspectives, descriptive language, and suggestive textual structure.

A place where one lives can be embedded with multiple meanings that are not self-

evident. How we conceive space and are mutually constituted by it carries cultural, political and social ramifications and affects the way our identities are articulated. The way *Valmiki's Daughter* firmly positions its subjects within the space of the city enables me to propose a theoretical investigation on the urban geographies in the novel. Sandra Almeida acknowledges the prevalence of the contemporary space of cities in narratives created by women authors. She argues that the spaces these individuals inhabit are a plural and heterogeneous category that functions as sites for the constant negotiation of subjectivities (*Cartografias de gênero* 44). Moreover, Almeida articulates a critique that links identity, power and the construction of self, asserting that: “The city . . . guides the conceptions of space and the organization of social, familial and sexual relations through which bodies are individualized to become subjects, as well as being the most immediate space of production and circulation of power”¹ (my trans.; *Cartografias de gênero* 142). It is with this conception of the urban area as a multifaceted place of dynamism, mobility, encounters, and relations, but also of exclusion, segregation, boundaries and power structures that I pursue when studying the construction of the space of the city in the narratives.

Fun Home, in addition to offering an intimate portrayal of the domestic space the narrator occupies, also evokes the city of New York in the seventies, a singular moment in the uprising of the gay liberation movements. Linda McDowell writes:

The anonymous urban crowd, as well as being a place for women to escape the bounds of conventional familiar morality and patriarchal ties, was and remains a place of escape for many others seeking to transgress conventional

¹ “A cidade, portanto, orienta as concepções do espaço e a organização das relações sociais, familiares e sexuais por meio das quais os corpos são individualizados para se tornarem sujeitos, além de ser o espaço mais imediato de produção e circulação de poder.”

boundaries. Cities offer opportunities to those whose lifestyle was once labelled deviant or perverse. (113)

Bechdel's narrative finds echo in MacDowell's affirmation in that it illustrates that the expression and articulation of desires are directly tied to spatial locations that provide chances for individuals to form a bond, create safe networks, and actively engage in political movements for the development of queer locations. Requiring a relational approach, chapter 2 also delineates how different political and cultural codes in *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter* affect the constitution of urban and public areas and how subjects can be a result of complex spatial mediations and intersections that shape conditions and produce material effects on identities.

Fundamental to approaching space in this research is to explore how it is profoundly interwoven with questions of gender. *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter* both privilege queer identities to figure in their fiction. The interplay between expressions of desire, heteronormativity, hegemonic standards and spatial relations, gender and sexual identities and their social construction are one of the common threads that tie these works together. Chapter 3 brings these issues into clearer focus, relying on a queer perspective to operate as the basis of my critique.

Feminist and cultural thinker Judith Butler is a major proponent in the area of queer theory and gender studies. Her influential *Gender Trouble* issues a relevant insight on the subject of sexuality, as viewed in both works here analyzed. The theorist challenges the illusion of a stable gender identity and coins the term "gender performativity," that is, gender as a non-inherent part of our essence, but as an act that is performed. Presenting a critique of power relations and heteronormativity, she questions fundamental assumptions about sex and

gender, and posits the notion that they are social and cultural constructs. The father and daughter characters Bruce and Alison and Valmiki and Viveka struggle with politics that regulate desire. Therefore, Butler's theorizations enable me to reflect upon the dominant question of gender and sexuality present in the novels.

When addressing the issue of compulsory heteronormativity, Butler writes that the:

heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine," where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female." The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of "identities" cannot 'exist' – that is, those in which gender does not follow from either sex or gender. "Follow," in this context, is a political relation of entailment instituted by the cultural laws that establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality. (17)

Heteronormativity, then, imposes a causal continuity between sex and gender that does not accommodate identities that diverge from this norm. It is possible, thus, to identify a pattern of "heterosexualization of desire" in Bruce and Valmiki, whose sexualities are not in conformity with the "cultural laws" that demand a coherent relation of continuity between one's biological sex and sexual desire. As such, these characters stand as ambivalent figures, because they are uniquely positioned individuals who strive to retain control over their homes but cultivate long-suppressed yearnings for the same sex. Both problematize the image of the patriarch, as they embrace traditional family models as a thinly veiled disguise for their transgression. Bruce and Valmiki's interactions with their surroundings, their homes, and communities reflect their dubious condition, and inspecting this relationship is a pertinent

part of my research.

It can be argued that gender is a system of meaning, a category of analysis and a discipline. The novels about which I research have gender at their core, as a topic that pervades the characters' main conflicts, their construction of subjectivities, and social interactions. It becomes important, then, to supply a brief overview of the term *queer* that informs my research. Previously a highly charged negative word used to insult homosexuals, the name has been appropriated and repurposed by the gay community to move away from derogatory meanings and signify an assertion and proud affirmation of non-normative sexual identities. Coined by the theorist Teresa de Lauretis in the nineties, queer studies designate a broader term, of particular relevance to this thesis, that operates as an epistemological tool to contest dominant identitarian paradigms and normative practices, putting forth a rhetoric based on difference. Viewing sexuality as an outcome of social and cultural constructions and proposing a more fluid and dynamic understanding of sexual and gender identities is another discourse outlined by queer politics.

The third section elaborates on these matters and discusses how they appear in *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter*. The main goal is to engage in a debate on the heteronormative constitution of spaces, resistance, diversity, and oppression in public and private spheres, the abject conceptualization of queer subjects, the construction of identities within hegemonic frames and how they are encoded in the bodies, concepts of manhood and femininity, binary classifications of gender difference and, finally, the contradictory position of patriarchal authority embodied by the fathers. From the great number of parallels that can be drawn, chapter 3 is, then, chiefly interested in bringing the narratives closer and trace their common ground concerning how gender relations manifest in the works.

Gender should not be, however, the single analytical frame upon which to base a discussion on difference and cultural discourses. As Butler remarks:

[G]ender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and [it] intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained (6)

Locating subjects within multiple axes of identity, power, and alterity is to take into account the specificities of how cultural identities are formed. As we migrate from one space to the other, a geography of difference is laid out. To discuss *Fun Home* in conjunction with *Valmiki's Daughter*, as I determine throughout this thesis, brings to the center of the argument the histories, spaces and processes as they interlock with markers of identity and subjectivity in each character.

By extending beyond the limits of gender, this work recognizes that each subject in the novels derives from distinct sets of circumstances and is imbricated in a particular signifying process. Susan Friedman, for instance, orients her geopolitical thinking towards a relational discourse of positionality. Her conceptual standpoint is a useful framework for my analysis, in that it “stresses the constantly shifting nature of identity as it is constituted through different points of reference and material conditions of history” (23). In the reasoning elaborated by Friedman and other critics who are involved in a discussion around identitarian politics, the complex interplay of national, class, racial, and gender borders define a constitution of reality as culturally, socially, and historically contingent.

Bechdel’s narrative moves across decades, giving her account as a white, female,

lesbian, middle-class North American, raised in the progressive seventies, daughter of an educated white, male, homosexual patriarch. Viveka and her father are also both homosexuals, born into a wealthy affluent Trinidadian family, racially marked by their Indian ancestry in a highly racially stratified society. Valmiki, similarly retains a patriarchal hold over his family, much like Bruce Bechdel. My endeavor to reach across these novels allows for a better understanding of changes across spaces and places that act to varying degrees on the constituencies of an individual. Across this continuum, “characters who move through narrative space and time occupy multiple and shifting positions in relation to each other and to different systems of power relations” (Friedman 28). A geography of positionality, then, sets out the conditions and becomes a key method to insert this work in debates about identity paradigms and their entwining with systems of difference and matrices of power.

The research I undertake can be considered relevant not only because of its originality in content, seeing as no previous study has been conducted connecting *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter*, but also because the role of space in contemporary women's writing has been a topic of great consideration in current debates. To quote from Almeida²:

[W]e have seen, in comparative literature and in English-language literature, in particular, the concepts of contemporary spaces are indelibly associated with the question of gender and feminist literary criticism. . . Since the 1990s, the space category has become one of the hallmarks of gender studies and feminist literary criticism, as well as prominently in the works of contemporary women

² “Como vimos, na literatura comparada e na literatura de língua inglesa, em especial, os conceitos dos espaços contemporâneos estão indelevelmente associados à questão de gênero e à crítica literária feminista . . . desde a década de 1990, a categoria espaço tornou-se um dos balizadores dos estudos de gênero e da crítica literária feminista, além de figurar com proeminência nas obras de escritoras contemporâneas.”

writers (my trans; *Cartografias de gênero* 35)

My comparative approach in relation to *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter* may therefore offer a contribution to this field of studies. Building a linkage between these literary works serves as a point of departure from which to consider a broad scope of issues, such as spaces, places, identity and gender.

Chapter 1

Daedalus of Decor

Of all his domestic inclinations, my father's decided bent for gardening was the most redolent to me of that other, more deeply disturbing bent . . . Our home was an efflorescence of bulbs, buds, and blooms, flowers wild and cultivated, native and imported, flowered vines and trees. Silk flowers, glass flowers, needlepoint flowers, flower paintings and, where any of these failed to materialize, floral patterns . . . If my father had a favorite flower, it was the lilac. A tragic botanical specimen, invariably beginning to fade even before reaching its peak.

(Bechdel, *Fun Home* 90)

1.1. Remarkable Legerdemain

“It was not, at any rate, a triumphal return. Home, as I had known it, was gone. Some crucial part of the structure seemed to be missing, like in dreams I would have later where termites had eaten through all the floor joists,” asserts the narrator Alison in *Fun Home* (216). Her return home after an extended absence to attend college is marked by feelings of ambivalence that characterize her relationship with her home on the whole. The narrator's shifting perception of home is primarily due to her father's death, a loss that prompts a revision of her relation with her family, childhood and house, to which her memories are invariably attached. In *Cartografias contemporâneas*, Sandra Almeida argues that the idea of home, along with the many terms related to it – house, dwelling, homeland, home town – have become a relevant trope in contemporaneity (68). Almeida also suggests an intrinsic relation between memory and place, arguing that the “construction of memory is linked to

people and their identification with spaces, without which there is no memory, for it can only be of that place of belonging, affiliation and affective membership”³ (my trans.; *Cartografias de gênero* 73). Almeida’s quote finds reverberation in Bechdel’s relationship with her house, because it hinges on the idea that identities are formed in relation to the position subjects occupy. Our stories and past experiences are thus inescapably tied to location.

Space and memory are closely bound up with one another in Bechdel’s fiction, as she elects home as a key part of her past and the place where the vast majority of her memories of affection were forged. The strong emotional ties she has towards her home, however, are permeated by equally painful and upsetting episodes, indicating that her relation with home is not necessarily positive in its entirety. In Bechdel’s dream, the house’s structure is irretrievably compromised. The above quotation in the opening of this chapter excerpted from *Fun Home*, signals not only at emotional adhesion but also at deterioration, alienation, disquiet, and at a sense of emptiness that almost reaches the point of collapse, as symbolized by the termites gradually eating their way through destruction.

When we write about home, it is inevitable to remember Gaston Bachelard’s influential *La Poétique de l’espace* [The Poetics of Space], in which the philosopher, concerned with the house, its interior, and its relation to the outside, offers a spatially-oriented approach towards the literary image, assigning a major significance to the home and its relation to memory and intimacy: “The house . . . is a privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space” (Bachelard 3). Chapters entitled “The House. From Cellar to Garret. The Significance of the Hut,” “House and

³ “a construção de memória está ligada às pessoas e suas identificações com os espaços, sem as quais não há memória pois essa pode apenas ser daquele lugar da pertença, da afiliação e da adesão afetiva.”

Universe,” “Drawers, Chests and Wardrobes,” “Corners,” and “The Dialectics of Outside and Inside” reveal how Bachelard gives prominence to the domestic space and its numerous components, placing focus on physical objects, such as rooms, furniture, and household objects, considering them to be suffused with meaning and charged with sensations and experiences. Bachelard’s view on how individuals experience intimate spaces explores how home is inhabited by focusing on lived experience:

a house is first and foremost a geometrical object, one which we are tempted to analyze rationally. Its prime reality is visible and tangible, made of well hewn solids and well fitted framework. It is dominated by straight lines, the plumbline having marked it with its discipline and balance. A geometrical object of this kind ought to resist metaphors that welcome the human body and the human soul. But transposition to the human plane takes place immediately whenever a house is considered as space for cheer and intimacy, space that is supposed to condense and defend intimacy (48)

The French philosopher acknowledges a house’s primary function of lodging individuals, but moves further by imbuing it with value and showing how various buildings, constructions and places elicit emotional responses from those inhabiting it. The notion that the intimate spaces we occupy carry an emotional weight is closely tied to Bechdel’s portrayal of her childhood memories in her hometown. “An entire past comes to dwell in a new house” (5), writes Bachelard, referring to the house as a place where memories are rooted. Bachelard’s reflections provide an awareness on how characters relate to the surroundings and their personal connections to the places in which they dwell. Affection and imagination lie at the core of this nostalgia-infused concept of the house as a hospitable environment fit for resting,

protecting and dreaming.

Countering this seemingly unproblematic idealization of the domestic space, however, recent studies, most notably by feminist scholars, have placed the concept under a more critical review. Although Bachelard recognizes the immense relevance of the domestic space to one's identity formation, his work does not account for the possibility of discord and rupture. Katherine Brickell's critical assessment of meanings associated to the home observes that "the symbolic use of home to enlist a sense of belonging, rootedness, memory and nostalgia has been complicated then by the role of negative and ambivalent feelings to home" (226), demonstrating that home, despite its usual association with security, warmth, and intimacy, is not a fixed concept and requires further consideration. Brickell highlights the importance of feminist criticism in placing an analytical focus on the domestic: "feminist analysis emphasiz[es] the domestic not as an individual and homogenously experienced unit of harmony, but as a potential site of struggle and conflict" (226) Such perspective offers a less simplistic and more complex view of the domestic sphere that steers away from traditional approaches that sacralize home as a balanced unity or dispute-free zone to privilege the multiple, often contradictory possibilities that concurrently include harmony and confrontation under the same domain.

As a portrayal of a fractured family, whose members are negotiating with their sexuality and gender identities, *Fun Home* gives prominence to the domestic realm as a place that both represents the foundation of the family and its potential collapse. How this space is represented and constructed in the narratives I work with, in relation to wider theoretical concerns with reworking meanings of home, or "(re)visioning a more complex and fluid understanding of the home" (Blunt and Dowling 227) is the main goal of this section. This

study relies to an extent on an examination of Bechdel's visual practices to compose that space and add visual meaning to the relationship with her house.

1.2. Multiple Doorways

Almeida identifies the home-trope as a recurring metaphor in narratives by female authors (46). As such, it has been the subject of much criticism in several areas of study. “[H]ome is a series of feelings and attachments, some of which, some of the time, and in some places, become connected to a physical structure that provides shelter” (10), write Blunt and Dowling. For them, home is seen as a theoretical notion that accommodates a wide range of meanings that ultimately understand home as dynamic. Their key proposition of home as both physical and imaginative provides the basis for a reflection on the concept as exceeding the mere function of a shelter and taking on a wider, metaphorical connotation. These perspectives guide my analysis on the constructions of the space of the home in *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter*.

Following a similar line of critique, Katherine Brickell borrows from Blunt and Dowling the term “critical geographies of home,” as proposed by the authors, to urge a revision of the concept, outlining main threads of geographical critique surrounding it, particularly criticizing a tendency towards the glorification of the domestic space “[o]nce cast as a uniform space of safety and familiarity, the home is now established as a far more problematic entity,” noting that it was previously “hailed in the geographical canon as a site of authenticity and experience, provisioning a sense of place and belonging” (225).

According to the conceptualizations above, home can be mainly defined as a concrete, tangible construction designed to house its residents. Its definition extends beyond

materiality, however, to receive cultural inscriptions that imbue it with a large scope of characteristics that have changed over time. Home also has an imaginative dimension connected to a feeling of belonging which is not restricted to a particular household, as attested by commonplace phrases like “feel at home,” and “home is where the heart is.” Previously described by “hegemonic discourses of home” (Brickell 239) as a source of comfort, solace, a sanctuary apart from urban chaos, the domestic sphere has been romanticized to the extent that positive associations surrounding the notion of home have largely neglected to consider other possibilities of perceptions an individual might experience: “As one of the most idealized sites of human existence, the home became a, if not the, metaphor for experiences of joy and protection that conspired to produce a normative association between home and positivity” (Brickell 225). This normativity to which the author alludes fails to acknowledge negative aspects one may have to endure under such arrangement. Thinking about how the home can affect its inhabitants and impact on one’s identity has been the concern of a number of critics, a discussion that emerges from a need to reevaluate this construct. As Almeida puts it, the “home is, therefore, inherently contradictory, a space of contest . . . but also a locus of multiple representative possibilities”⁴ (my trans.; *Cartografias de gênero* 69). These current approaches offer the grounds for a better understanding of home, households and domesticity, bringing new perspectives regarding narratives that explore these images and thus enabling a critical reading of the domestic space in *Fun Home* and *Valmiki’s Daughter*.

It is also crucial to mention that views of the home in terms of a zone of solace, comfort and warmth have been traditionally coded as feminine and are intricately bound up

⁴ “o lar é, portanto, inerentemente contraditório, um espaço de contestação . . . mas também um locus de múltiplas possibilidades representativas.”

with essentialist concepts of femininity that construct women as nurturing care-providers. “While spaces reflect the gender ideologies in whose context they are produced, they also reinforce assumptions about what men and women are like and how they should behave accordingly,” (24) maintains Nicole Schröder in *Spaces and Places in Motion*. Assuming gender-specific characteristics affects how space is conceived. The private sphere of the domestic being associated to women, in opposition to the public sphere as a male-dominated domain, follows a gendered logic that creates a spatial division.

Almeida argues that geography plays a crucial role in the cultural processes of gender formation. Referring to the interchange between gender and geography, she highlights “the traditional division of the private from the public space in terms of gender, the construction of the home space as a female sphere, the mobility of subjects framed in a differentiated system due to gender issues, areas of violence that directly affect men and women in distinct manners”⁵ (my trans; *Cartografias de gênero* 36) as main examples of the relation between geography and gender. Almeida identifies Doreen Massey as one of the key thinkers on the intersection between space and gender and the relations deriving from that. In *Space, Place and Gender*, Massey holds that “the attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control on identity” (179), showing that understanding the home as gendered space to which women are relegated is directly connected to power relations. Historically, women have been inextricably linked to the domestic space, if not restricted by it. In addition to being confined to this allegedly feminine place, they can sometimes be deprived of the very positive aspects the house is

⁵ “a tradicional divisão do espaço público do privado em termos de gênero, a construção do espaço do lar como uma esfera feminina, a mobilidade dos sujeitos enquadrados em um sistema diferenciado por questões de gênero.”

supposed to provide. Notions of privacy and stability are denied to women for whom the space of the home is that of labor, oppression, exhaustion and dependence. Virginia Woolf's essay "A Room of One's Own" promptly comes to mind when considering the spaces women occupy and the idea of freedom and access to the public realm. At the core of Woolf's argument lies the vision that women should be granted both literal and figurative space to overcome limitations in creative liberty and education in a male-dominated literary tradition.

Moreover, Doreen Massey writes that the "construction of 'home' as a woman's place has . . . carried through into those views of place itself as a source of stability, reliability and authenticity. Such views of place, which reverberate with nostalgia for something lost, are coded female' (180). Therefore, conceptions of security and protection associated to meanings of home must therefore also rely on supposedly naturally-given gender attributes.

Culturally constructed distinctions between public and private realms as separate spheres are the outcome of a binary thinking that has doubtlessly been placed under examination as a major concern of feminist critics. "The intimate and personal spaces of home – and their loss – are closely bound up with, rather than separate from, wider power relations" (229) argues Brickell. Instead of conceiving the public-private politics in dualistic terms, it is preferable to favor a more relational contact between the two, as Blunt and Dowling claim:

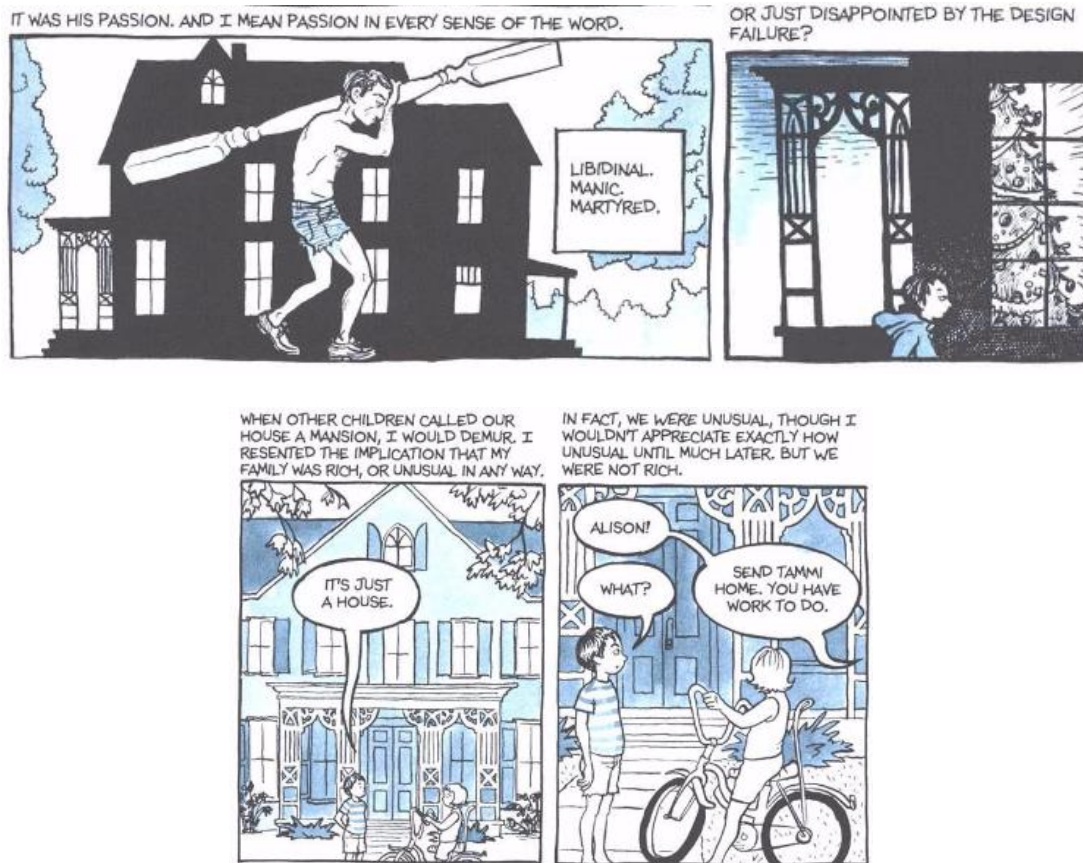
Home as a place is a porous, open intersection of social relations and emotions. As feminists have pointed out, home is neither public nor private but both. Home is not separated from public, political worlds but is constituted through them: the domestic is created through the extradomestic and vice versa. It is certainly the case that familial relations and identities are important in

imagined and lived homes . . . But it is also the case that other social relations also intersect in a place called home. (27)

Rather than a clear-cut distinction of home separate from wider public issues, we have the result of an interplay. Home and the public realm, then, constitute a dialectical interchange, in which the private and public sphere and are permeable to mutually influence each other. Schröder also problematizes the inside-outside dichotomy: “Places, then, cannot be adequately conceptualized as strictly bordered, homogeneous, and self-contained locations: they are determined as much by what is contained ‘inside’ as by their connections to the outside” (26). The domestic and the public spheres constitute a reciprocation. I will return to the topic of the interchange between private and public settings further on when I approach the space of the city and examine how the private and the public intersect on a larger scale in the selected narratives.

1.3. Icarian Games

As indicated by the name itself, the domestic space figures prominently in Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. Not only do indoor scenes prevail throughout the novel, but the manner in which the space of the home is represented differs from other places, such as Alison’s college dorm, the library or a roadside diner. In the first chapter, shortly after meeting the main characters, the reader is introduced to the Bechdel’s mansion as a place that is central to the narrative. The following pages of the graphic novel allow the house to take center stage in the panels, whereas the characters are shown as diminished figures by contrast. When scenes take place in the outside area of the Bechdel property, the large house can be seen looming over characters, invariably featured in the background (see fig. 1, 2, 3 pp. 7, 12, 5).



These initial stances attest the importance of the house, establishing it as a main element around which the narrative will mostly revolve. Feelings of ambiguity towards their living situation can be detected, as the narrator describes how space is perceived by characters:

[Bruce's] shame inhabited our house as pervasively and invisibly as the aromatic musk of aging mahogany. In fact, the meticulous, period interiors were expressly designed to conceal it. Mirrors, distracting bronzes, multiple doorways. Visitors often got lost upstairs. My mother, my brothers and I know our way around well enough, but it was impossible to tell if the minotaur lay beyond the next corner. And by the constant tension that was heightened by the fact that some encounters could be quite pleasant. His bursts of kindness were

as incandescent as his tantrums were dark. (21)

As expressed in the excerpt above, the narrator's relationship to her father Bruce is built upon images of the house. Bruce's ubiquitous presence cannot be dissociated from the Bechdel's household. This connection is reinforced if we notice that, in the first chapter, when Bruce is shown within the space of the house, he is almost invariably touching, holding and making physical contact with its furnishings (see fig. 4 pp. 10).



Whether he is polishing a mirror, measuring a wall, hanging curtains, or carrying pieces of wood, the relation of proximity that creates a link between the house and the father is given emphasis through Bechdel's drawings. Moreover, her father's painstaking and unceasing home improvement project at the expense of his family takes a heavy toll on its members, turning the home into a space of confrontation. Bruce, "indifferent to the human cost of his projects" (Bechdel 11), invests his affections in furnishings, as the narrator observes: "My brothers and I couldn't compete with the astral lamps and girandoles and Hepplewhite suite chairs. They were perfect. I grew to resent the way my father treated his furniture like children and his children like furniture" (14). Metaphorical associations between the narrator and parts of the house often take form of a feeling of inferiority and alienation, that stems

from the excessive attention to which Bruce devotes to material aspects of living in detriment of his emotional affiliation towards his family. His relationship to the house in regard to broader themes of gender, sexuality and social relations will be addressed in chapter 3.

Blunt and Dowling claim that “[h]ome is a material dwelling and it is also an affective space, shaped by emotions and feelings of belonging. As geographers, we understand home as a relation between material and imaginative realms and processes” (22). In *Fun Home*, the material relevance of the domestic environment is rendered visible through the visual excess by which Bechdel’s style is characterized. Carefully drawn chairs, lamps, curtains, chandeliers, elaborate furniture, adorned frames and ornamented wallpapers take up large portions of the panels, imposing their presence and noticeably cornering characters (see fig. 5 pp. 60).



The pictorial significance given to the house underscores its symbolic significance as a place simultaneously marked by affective affiliations as well a continuous tension.

Adrielle Mitchell, in “Spectral Memory, Sexuality and Inversion,” states that “[*Fun Home*] frames the development of a lesbian identity through the strategic use of visual and verbal representation of memories, interpretive acts, and the use of specific literary texts as transitional objects”. Such “strategic use” can be seen when the complex and tension-filled relationship the characters have is visually attested in the very first panels. Although the family is usually sharing the same space, there is either a tangible impediment in their way (a lamp, a Christmas tree, or any other carefully placed household object) (see fig. 6 pp. 86)



Or it may be that the characters’ position conveys distance somehow (Bruce is often standing up a ladder, in a different room, or portrayed as a mere sinister shadow), but they are hardly ever standing harmoniously together on an equal level (see fig. 7 pp. 13).



“The choice of the graphic medium for her memoir allows Bechdel to explore primal scenes quite literally,” asserts Mitchell. Strained family ties are rendered both through visual elements, dialogues and narration. The first moment in which a panel illustrates family union and balance is promptly contradicted by its line. We see the Bechdels solemnly lined in a row during a church service, but rather than being relieved from all the family friction, we read: “He appeared to be an ideal husband or a father for example. But would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?” (17) (see fig. 8 pp. 17).



In the following panel, Alison is seen taking a picture of the family together, but proceeds to reinforce the revelation: “It’s tempting to suggest, in retrospect, that our family was a sham” (17). Lies, deceit and artifice are a recurrent theme enforced in the narrative to refer to Bruce and his ambiguous construction of self in association with the construction of space of the home.

The narrator frequently describes her feelings of being in her own home as disquieting and unsettling, reaching the point of comparing her family with the fictional characters from the comically macabre Addams Family, whose satirical approach to American values is a mockery of fully functional, self-possessed nuclear families. The analogy mirrors Bechdel’s own perception of being in a Gothic mansion in an unconventional living arrangement, especially considering that running a funeral home was their means of livelihood. Concluding the Addams family correlation, the narrator writes: “what gave the comparison real weight was the family business and the cavalier attitude which inevitably, we came toward it . . . My brothers and I had lots of chores at the Fun Home, but also many interesting opportunities for play” (37). The funeral home, a place indissociably connected to death where services for the deceased are provided, takes on a positive connotation as the characters – indifferent to any possible grim associations – unceremoniously occupy that space, relating on comfortable terms with caskets, graves, embalming rooms, and cadavers. The mundanity with which these activities are performed can be set in sharp contrast with the gravity which often underlies the fractious relations in the actual Bechdel home: “Our house was not a real home at all, but the simulacrum of one, a museum. Yet we really were a family, and we really did live in those period rooms. Still, something vital was missing, an elasticity, a margin for error” (18). The allusion to “fun home” in the book’s title indicates both the funeral home where the family

business is conducted and an ironic reversal of the tense familial environment under which characters reside. By conflating these two meanings under the same heading, the novel seeks to combine places that carry distinct significances within the narrative, fusing the actual home with the funeral home, thus generating a sense of estrangement. The narrative's ambiguous name serves this dual function that implies that home can be located elsewhere, and establishes a dissonance when joining the familiar and the unfamiliar. Home is, then, defamiliarized. In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, bell hooks discusses her personal relationship towards her own home, family, and community, affirming that:

At times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become. (227)

hooks aims at moving beyond boundaries of home as a fixed place of residence and calls attention to its continually shifting meanings. Her affirmation that home is not a single, definite space corresponds to Alison's identification with settings other than her home as a place of affection and belonging.

Blunt and Dowling describe home "as a place and an imaginary [that] constitutes identities – people's senses of themselves are related to and produced through lived and imaginative experiences of home" (24). The narrator's identity and sense of self is invariably attached to her sense of home and, by extension, to the domestic relations established within

that household. The quote from hooks suggests that the self is deeply imbricated in one's relation to place. Her assertion strikingly resonates with Blunt and Dowling description of home "as a place and an imaginary [that] constitutes identities – people's senses of themselves are related to and produced through lived and imaginative experiences of home" (24). Alison's identity and sense of self is invariably attached to her sense of home and, by extension, to the domestic relations established within that household.

1.4. House of Secrets

Home also appears as a field of contest in *Valmiki's Daughter*. Scenes that take place within the Krishnus household are notable for their continually rising tension and family turbulence. Viveka's repeated outbursts of anger at her parents, her frustration in the face of failed attempts at conquering autonomy, Devika's growing discontent with her husband, and the Vishnus' failing marriage characterize the family dynamics. As Schröder notes, "It makes much more sense to view home as a site of and for ambiguity since its protective functions are interconnected with its limiting characteristics. Feelings of solidarity, safety, and protection are often achieved by severe acts of exclusion and regulation, which are in turn oppressive" (33). Schröder's work, developed around the construction of spaces and places in literature, focuses on how these spaces are created and their potential to challenge normative discourses: "Literature as a social practice is inextricably intertwined with the production of space . . . it can be used to question spatial productions, notably those based on the norms and values of society's dominating groups" (13). Her remark is congruent with the portrayal of home in Mootoo's novel, as the material comforts offered by the privileges of living in the upper-class Luminada Heights suburb may clash with the maintenance of a lifestyle that

requires severe codes of conduct that often restrict character's freedom.

In *Valmiki's Daughter*, characters seek other spaces of identification as an alternative source of belonging. The forest, whose image permeates the narrative, evokes these possibilities of different places of affection that are not particularly tied to home. As Schröder argues:

Home can also emerge as a place where alternative versions of the self are created and alternative lifestyles are lived since the exclusion of the outside can also mean the protection from restricting outside forces such as social norms and laws. Yet home can of course also be a place of limitation and even oppression, a place where the self is heavily restricted for a number of reasons.

(32)

Failing to find protection from “restricting outside forces” in their own place, both Valmiki and Viveka see the forest as an escape from the confines of the house. A meaningful moment is the passage in which a party is being hosted at Anick's, Viveka's lover. Anick invites people to take a stroll in the woods and her suggestion is met with shock by her guests who, appalled and perplexed by the proposal, promptly refuse. On the other hand, Viveka, Valmiki, and Anick, considered to be subjects lying outside the norm, are frequently leaning towards the forest, as though inevitably drawn to it. “In the forest . . . [he] was no one's father, husband, employer or healer. He was one with them. They were one with each other” (57), says the narrator in *Valmiki's Daughter*. Valmiki's hunting circle, to whom he often resorts, offers him the chance to leave “the comfort of his tamer world . . . and [go] deep into the dark dank forest with them” (58). He feels “the thrill of an excursion where his friends all reeked similarly, as if this were the mark of an unusual affinity” (59). Admittedly not a gifted

hunter, Valmiki's meetings are clearly not about the hunting itself, but the male bonding and camaraderie they entailed. As emphasized by Schröder: "not for everybody is home located in a certain house, at a certain address - rather, it might be connected to people, family, and friends, it might be associated with a specific feeling. The feeling of being home is therefore not inevitably restricted to being at a certain place" (34). Throughout the novel, the forest motif is presented as oddly enticing, full of potentiality, a secretive place to go unnoticed from the watchful eyes of the family and local community: "[Anick and Viveka] strolled out of earshot, turned their backs to everyone and faced the forest greenery" (350). This example shows how these characters are frequently moving towards or looking at the direction of the forest and deeper into a sense of privacy and freedom.

Viveka experiences the space of the wilderness in a similar manner, although her relation to the forest is seemingly more visual, in contrary to her father's more physical, material connection to it: "They faced the forest. Valmiki could imagine its interior. The scent of the earth, dying flora, rejuvenating soil, and [his lover] Saul" (353). Sight-related words regularly come up when referring to Viveka and the woods: "She looked out in the direction of the cabin, imagining the forest flora there" (350). This tension between seeing and touching invoked by the forest, respectively represented by Viveka and Valmiki, underscores the rift and differences between the two of them. If the forest is thought in symbolic terms as a promise of transgression, Viveka's glancing at the woods implies the temptation of crossing that threshold. In turn, her father's relating to it on a tactile level, as opposed to Viveka's mere gazing, carries the idea of having moved beyond that boundary.

A caged bird kept in the Vishnu's household adequately illustrates the sensation of entrapment sustained by the characters. The captured animal contrasts to the vast wilderness

offered by the forest motif and metaphorically represents the situation lived by those imprisoned in the allegorical cage that stands for the domestic space in Mootoo's story. Feelings of inadequacy at home and in the community induce a desire to belong elsewhere, projected onto the woods. Attempts to produce new conceptions of home that may provide affinity and reassurance constitutes "spatial acts of resistance" (238), as Brickell puts it, as they pose "challenges to ingrained exclusionary practices and hegemonic discourses of home that have the capacity to rally further understanding of how social change at the domestic level comes about at differing levels of permanency and adequacy" (239). However, although the forest opens up new avenues for imagining alternative spaces, the home significantly remains a primary site of confrontation in *Valmiki's Daughter*.

Valmiki's refusal to challenge social assumptions at the risk of harming his respectable career and social standing reveals that, although one may assume that queer kinship could offer a different configuration of family and a more accepting pattern for living, this does not hold true in *Valmiki's Daughter*. Instead, it can be observed that the domestic sphere is subjected to corresponding social codes, functioning as a site for the reproduction of a heteronormative regime sanctioned by the community. Brickell notices the "potential conflict between the agency expressed by individuals and by the household permeated disciplinary boundaries" (226), pointing at the contradiction between individual desire and action against social norms reinforced in the home. Despite being aware of her father's illicit encounters with other men, Viveka fails to find acceptance when confronted with her own same-sex attraction, and although she wishes to embrace her sexuality, she is suppressed by a discriminatory mindset that mutes non-heteronormative desires. Sissi Helff and Sanghamitra Dalal comment on the father-daughter relationship by saying that this

“emerging dialectics generates an intergenerational space of negotiation in which gender and sexuality are presented as limiting and liberating forces at the same time” (79). Valmiki’s ultimate choice to sustain his enactment of the role of the patriarch profoundly impacts his daughter’s and his own intimate lives.

Domestic space in *Valmiki’s Daughter* can be considered the ground for the consolidation of patriarchal power and the replication of the social norms and its restraining demands. As Schröder points out, “the production of spaces and places is never naïve, innocent or neutral - they do not simply emerge somehow but they are deliberately created and are frequently expressions of particular ideologies, social norms and values” (22). Seeing as any attempt to defy the social order would invariably come to result in its decline, the Krishnu’s household must embody an archetype of a nuclear family headed by an authoritative male. Questions of gender involved in the role performed by the figure of the ambiguously situated patriarchs performed by the fathers in *Fun Home* and *Valmiki’s Daughter* will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

Home is a central image in *Fun Home* and *Valmiki’s Daughter*. The domestic space remains a pervasive concern in Bechdel’s text and is the guiding trope used to convey the narrator’s relationship to her father, her memories, and herself. Mootoo’s novel presents the Krishnu’s household as a place of family strife and hostility, compelling characters to envision alternative spaces for their affiliations. The representation of this space in these works reveal that home is not neutral, but political. How characters perceive the domestic environment in which they live significantly shapes their experiences and interactions and situates home paradoxically as a place of affection and dispute. It can be thus said that the

novels destabilize traditional meanings of home since the views they put forth allow for an understanding of space that refuses fixity and stasis.

Chapter 2

Unyielding Concrete

You could see your own house as a tiny fleck on an ever-widening landscape, or as the center of it all from which the circles expanded into the infinite unknown. It is that question of feeling at the center that gnaws at me now. At the center of what?

(Rich, "Notes Toward a Politics of Location" 212)

2.1. Venture outside

"[It] was as if one of his foot was trapped in a cement block, the other dangling to the side uselessly," the narrator asserts in *Valmiki's Daughter* (392). Valmiki's constraint, as expressed in this quotation, with one foot firmly rooted in the ground and the other one tentatively loose, is manifested in spatial terms. Powerless to prevent his daughter's impending marriage with Trevor, the sentence above establishes a spatial connection to define his sense of entrapment, which takes shape as a physical limitation that keeps Valmiki from moving. Movement, restraint, and spatial mobility in the urban space are key to understanding the characters' relation to their city in *Valmiki's Daughter*. The space of the city, a fictional portrayal of San Fernando, is a dominant image in Mootoo's narrative. In "Cities of Connection and Disconnection," Ash Amin and Stephen Graham refer to cities as "woven fully into all the social ambiguities of modern life, with their tensions between shared purposes and conflicting individualism, their contested desires and cultural demands, and their mixtures of exclusion, inclusion, fear and trust" (34). Amin and Graham acknowledge the contradictory nature of the city in its multiplicity of possibilities that encompass a variety

of individuals, cultures, and social relations in space. Such perspective closely corresponds to the way in which the space of the city is portrayed in Mootoo's novel. Meanings of home and representations of domestic space in *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter* were our topic of discussion in the previous chapter. We now move our focus to an examination of the space of the city in both narratives.

Moving from the alleged intimacy of the domestic sphere to the larger scale of an urban scenario in my work does not imply that those are separate spheres, as mentioned earlier in chapter 1. “[T]hinking about home has been geographic, highlighting relations between place, space, scale, identity and power” (2), Blunt and Dowling argue, showing how the private and public realms intersect and influence each other. Being necessarily inserted in a community which, to a greater extent integrates the wider territory of a nation, a home “can be conceptualized as processes of establishing connections with others and creating a sense of order and belonging as part of rather than separate from society” (Blunt and Dowling 14). Likewise, Schröder calls attention to the connection between inside and outside, reminding us of the futility in the attempt to separate the local from the global, since the two are reciprocally constructed. To her, places “are defined not in opposition to their outside but precisely through the particularity of linkage to that outside” (27). The home and the city are thus inevitably imbricated in one another.

Mootoo's narrative, from which the image of the city continually emerges and is brought to the fore as a meaningful trope, allows me to propose a critical discussion of the space of the city, urban centers and the subsequent cultural and social relations inscribed in them. Similar to Alison in *Fun Home*, to whom the domestic space is associated to her relationship with her father, it is through images of the city that the narrator in *Valmiki's*

Daughter constructs the narrative.

Scholars and critics have addressed the question of cities in contemporaneity in terms of transit, flows, fluidity, power, margins, and cosmopolitanism. Almeida draws from these discursive frameworks on the space of cities to affirm that a cosmopolitan city is “a prominent space of contemporary mobilities”⁶ (my trans. 143) which presupposes an “articulation between this space of constant interactions and the plural and moving bodies that inhabit these cities”⁷ (my trans.; *Cartografias de gênero* 143). Subjects move around that place in a continuous and dynamic exchange with their surroundings. This contact between individuals and the space they occupy decisively shapes the way identities and, by extent, cities, are formed. As Almeida notes: “The space of contemporary cities [is] that of transit, of passage, of displacement and mobility, always affecting and being affected by the various bodies that circulate through it”⁸ (my trans.; *Cartografias de gênero* 143). Moreover, the diversity of identities, cultures, languages, values, social groups, and practices by which the constant and intense flow of people in modern metropolises is characterized composes a heterogeneous society whose ensuing ambivalence may engender both positive change but also harmful friction.

This tension caused by multifarious attribute of cities is referred by John Allen, Doreen Massey and Michael Pryke, in the introduction to *Unsettling Cities* as the “juxtaposition of different cultures, races, ages and classes in urban settings, often in close contact and proximity”, which, in turn “prompts the question of how difference is negotiated

⁶ “espaço de destaque das mobilidades contemporâneas.”

⁷ “articulação entre esse espaço de interações constantes e os corpos plurais e moventes que habitam essa cidades.”

⁸ “o espaço das cidades contemporâneas como sendo aquele do trânsito, da passagem, do deslocamento e da mobilidade, sempre afetando e sendo afetado pelos vários corpos que por ele circulam.”

in the city” (4). Being in the public arena and sharing an urban space, albeit a meaningful exchange, simultaneously entails the possibility of confront. As explained by the critics, the “physical fact of settled groups and communities placed close together in cities may conjure up a meeting of differences that can lead just as easily to conflict and intolerance as it does to respect and mutual recognition” (4). Life in the city is, therefore, a continuous encounter with the other, an awareness of difference.

The complexity of such encounter often breeds the endeavor to be isolated and disconnected from certain groups with which there is no supposed identification. Hence the increasing attempts of building gated communities, leisure areas, shopping malls, luxury shops, restaurants, and clubs, where difference can be minimized by high security and social control. Accordingly, Amin and Graham believe that public spaces are not necessarily “theatres of cordial interchange, civic tolerance and democratic engagement,” (21) since “diversity does not automatically produce tolerance and the open usage of public spaces. It could produce spatial segregation, or mixture” (22). Large urban centers, being heavily populated areas and economic, cultural, and political zones, have a decisive role in organizing a society. Structures of power – such as institutions, governments, companies, dominant classes and ideologies – affect the way in which public spaces are produced and organized, resulting in a social configuration of space that often excludes and marginalizes other identities, most notably immigrants, ethnic groups, lower-class citizens, and sexual minorities.

Spatial segregation is a chief thematic concern in *Valmiki's Daughter*. The Krishnu's suburban home, located in the exclusive, high-priced housing area of Luminada Heights is set apart from the busy and chaotic urban scene of San Fernando. Passages that illustrate the

route towards the Vishnu's home are indicative of the power dynamics embedded in the spatial configuration of the city: "Say you want to see at least one neighborhood that will tell you something more about town and country. There are many neighborhoods you might venture into, but a drive through Luminada heights is a social lesson in itself" (Mootoo 187). Naming it a "social lesson" underscores the social constructedness of space, in that social and spatial practices that structure Trinidadian landscape are a product of the relations of power underlying it. As Massey comments on the conceptualization of space, "created out of social relations, space is by its very nature full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation. This aspect of space has been referred to elsewhere as a kind of 'power-geometry'" (265). "Power-geometry" is a key term when considering how space is represented in Mootoo's novel. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the narrative voice suggests that learning about a neighborhood can provide a better understanding of Trinidad as a nation. Relating "the town and the country" evidences how the local informs the global and vice versa. Social and spatial processes practiced in the town thus reflect in the wider field of the country as a whole.

Presented through an extensive description in the text, the area where Luminada Heights is placed is hard to access and, to get there, one must undergo a long journey through winding and high roads: "Don't walk – the hills are steep, the roads narrow and the traffic dangerously swift," the narrator explains (187). It is necessary to move past various precarious houses and areas of less financial comfort, in a continuous movement of going upwards:

Slowly, perhaps, but surely, these lands with exceptional views, on which squatters live in huts and shacks with no running water or electricity, will give

way to the kinds of homes that are built just a little farther on – the ones with gardens designed for entertaining, all angled just so, to take the advantage of the view of the gulf. (Mootoo 188)

A sharp contrast in living conditions is identified in the excerpt above from *Valmiki's Daughter*. On one side, substandard accommodations lacking decent basic services and, on the other, refined properties self-indulgently projected to accommodate frivolous features. Almeida thinks of the contemporary world from two perspectives. First, it is “characterized by the confluence of geopolitical sites, the elimination of frontiers and the sharing of social spaces”⁹ (my trans. 44) but, on the other hand, it also “shows itself increasingly sectarian and excluding in its daily practices”¹⁰ (my trans.; *Cartografias de gênero* 44). The flagrant unequal distribution of resources observed in the portrayal of San Fernando can be seen as a daily practice that excludes lower-income individuals and families from quality standards of living and access to commodities. Later in her analysis, Almeida theoretically explores the meaning of global cities:

Instead of providing the desired instruments for social insertion, the global city often generates an increasing asymmetry caused by a social composition of the global city that determines an economic polarization, causing the concentration of benefits in a high-income stratum and, on the other hand, generating a decline in the working conditions and wages of low-income workers. (my trans.; *Cartografias de gênero* 146)¹¹

⁹ “se caracteriza pela confluência de locais geopolíticos, pela eliminação de fronteiras e pelo compartilhamento de espaços sociais.”

¹⁰ “mostra-se . . . sectário e excludente em suas práticas cotidianas.”

¹¹ “ao invés de fornecer os instrumentos de inserção social almejados, a cidade global gera, com frequência, uma crescente assimetria ocasionada por uma composição social da cidade global,

Lying at the opposite ends of the social spectrum, Trinidadian elite and its destitute are woven into the fabric of society in an asymmetric polarization that maps out a geography of power in Mootoo's narrative.

The high-end district where the Krishnus reside is situated in a superior position in the island, a secluded region overlooking the coast and the cityscape. This placement encompasses the implied hierarchy of San Fernando and its inhabitants, exposing Trinidad's highly stratified social system: one must ascend, after going through the "chronology of affluence" (Mootoo 189), to reach the privileged part of town, where the economically advantaged live. The narrator resorts to a spatial terminology when describing the geographical journey, using words like "ascend," "hills," "steep," "winding," and "meandering" to imply an upward, yet tortuous motion in the journey. It is argued, in *Unsettling Cities*, that certain urban patterns, such as this one present in the novel, constitute an effort of those with high economic standing to make a distinction between their group and others: "people retreat from public interchange into the alleged comfort and safety of homogeneous communities" (20). This "act of retreat" (20) to which they refer strives to eliminate diversity in the name of an alleged unity. As the critics put it:

enclave communities [that] are being developed maximize internal connections within similar socio-economic and cultural groups whilst severing the connections that might force these groups to mix with other social, ethnic or income groups in the city . . . this is a development that breaks decisively with the idea of the 'urban' as a shared space. (20)

que determina uma polarização econômica, causando a concentração de benefícios em um estrato de alta renda e, em contrapartida, gerando declínio das condições de trabalho e salários dos trabalhadores de baixa renda . . . espaços cujas dinâmicas internas e estrutura social."

A social practice of exclusion according to which the city plan is laid out becomes evident in *Valmiki's Daughter*. As the narration moves from an area where sections of the population are steeped in poverty to the reserved enclaves of dominant classes occupying a point of privilege, it accentuates inequalities and uncovers the process of how Trinidadian society is disposed, in an operation in which the social landscape reproduces the social structure. Reaching a higher position thus takes on both literal and symbolic meanings, seeing as the pathway makes explicit the class distinction and hierarchical organization of the territory it covers, navigating from impoverished areas lacking basic facilities like water and electricity to the opulence of luxurious mansions.

The “exclusionary landscape” (Brickell 228) mapped out in the description of the urban scenario in Mootoo’s narrative reveals the fault lines in the way societies organize space. It raises questions about the use of the adjective “public” in the phrase “public space.” Although, in a broader sense, “public” is assumed to imply something of common use to all citizens, restrictions apply, and its scope can be far more limiting than what encompassing definitions of the social sphere and the social life taking place within it might suggest.

Amin and Graham examine the broad range of activities and procedures such as traveling, shopping, eating, practicing sports, socializing, religion, cultural events, political action, administration, and leisure activities that constitute the spatial framework of city living. In the urban space, they say, “practices are spatially expressed, and hence they stamp the particular identity of a city. They become expressed in physical forms through ethnic and social clustering, specialist centers, and the continual construction and reconstruction of new social and cultural spaces” (34). These multiple practices that are integral to the aspect of a city, where many lives and actions invariably intersect, pose a difficulty in sustaining a fully

isolated community based on exclusion. So, “despite widespread efforts at attempted social enclosure, heterogeneity continues to thrive within contemporary cities” (34), write Amin and Graham, further arguing that “cities are in fact constituted by such fluid interactions” (34). Thus, the pursuit of an excluding space cleared of impurities, like the one depicted in Mootoo’s story, is likely to fail because of the dynamic character of urban centers, since clearly delimited boundaries of separation between places, institutions, and individuals can be permeable. Imagined landscapes traced in *Valmiki’s Daughter* shed a light in the social relations implied in geographical distributions, but they also present a portrayal of the city in its diversity.

2.2. Elsewhere

“The town was small. And here Valmiki was, looking out toward the sea and feeling imprisoned,” the narrator claims in *Valmiki’s Daughter* (391). In an apparent contradiction, Valmiki is gazing at the vast expanse of the ocean and experiencing a sense of confinement. In the previous chapter, we presented the forest motif as symbolizing the characters’ pursuit of alternative modes of living. Their longing for a place from which to escape is further emphasized by a continuous expression of entrapment used throughout the novel, conveyed by words like “suffocating,” “small,” “limited,” “imprisoned,” “trapped,” and “narrow,” all of which are associated with the space of the city surrounding them: “This place is too small for you . . . leave this behind, there is so much more waiting for you elsewhere” (354). And also: “[Valmiki] would never see [his lover] Saul again. Even if this meant he would spend the rest of his life without air in his chest” (354), “The place had strangled [Viveka]” (346). Although the urban center of San Fernando is regarded as a large, densely populated

Trinidadian city on a spatial scale, it becomes overwhelmingly small when set against normative gender structures that shape the social-political reality in the Caribbean. “While cities embody the exciting prospect of intense social relations with individuals and groups from a wide range of backgrounds with different attitudes, beliefs and customs, they are also arenas of potential conflict,” (103) says Linda McDowell in “City Life and Difference: Negotiating Diversity.” Conflicts arise from the coexistence of difference and diversity in the urban space, as we mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Departing from the island is an alluring prospect of liberation that provides a solution to the feeling of inadequacy provoked by spatial limitations of the urban arena:

She had to leave. That was clear. But leave how, and go where? What if she were to find a haven in the Trinidad Anick had told her about, in the north of the island? But in her heart she knew that there was nowhere on her small island far away and safe enough. After all, it was not only her security but that of her family, her mother and her father and [her sister] Vashti, that would be affected. (360)

Family ties and their consequent erosion are one of the chief reasons to conform to dominating forms of social control. We learned that the Krishnus belong to a socially prominent group in Trinidad, therefore socially prescribed expectations are established for them. Transgressing gender boundaries would pose a menace to both the familial unit and to the economic and social rank they were able to achieve. The recurring image of the city as restricting forms a pattern that sets the possible act of leaving and escaping as a major theme in Mootoo’s story. The narrative pattern constructed in the novel creates a movement that contrasts with its static subjects deeply rooted in space that encloses them. Afternoons spent

with her lover Anick evoke in Viveka “delightful and terrifying sensations” and “a rush of dizzying desire” while “thoughts of Merle Bedi's fate played in her mind.” (260) Illustrated in this example is the opposition between pleasure and fear that deeply marks the characters in the novel.

Let us now resume our initial image of Valmiki delineated at the outset of the previous subchapter, caught in a block of cement with one foot stuck and the other released from closure. Metaphorically linked to a rock, Valmiki evokes the dual idea of being grounded and oscillating towards freedom. Subjects in *Valmiki's Daughter* are frequently wavering between renouncing their reality to seek independence and remaining firmly in place, between agency and impotence, leading to a dialectics of motion and stasis: “Viveka oscillated between two poles. She decided one minute to still whatever thought Anick . . . had stirred in her. Such thoughts and feelings were dangerous tricksters out to trip her up and land her, like Merle, out on her own, family-less” (261). The recurrent yearning for leaving is often undercut by paralyzing doubt and uneasiness, usually materialized in the figure of the unfortunate Merle Bedi, a character about whom I speak in the third chapter.

I suggested before that mobility is a main notion in defining the spatial relations outlined in the novel. It is inevitable to discuss this issue when referring to the space of cities, their constant flows, movement and exchange. The concept is linked to having the autonomy to go everywhere at will and, most significantly, to have access to other spaces. Mobility emerges as being directly connected to power and liberty in Mootoo's novel. Trevor, Viveka's eventual husband, places high value in his ability to go from one place to another as he pleases, because his job and income allow him to do so. He enjoys the benefit to travel freely and to his own purposes, making it explicit that he mostly does so simply because he

can, that being his main goal in moving around. Confronted with his proposal to marry him, Viveka comes to the realization that their union implies relocating to Canada, where she could gain the means of entry into a more cosmopolitan space to find a better, more accepting and tolerant environment.

In “Cities and Economic Change,” Nigel Thrift analyzes the role performed by cities in the overall global economy. He supports the notion that urban spaces can promote the construction of new relations:

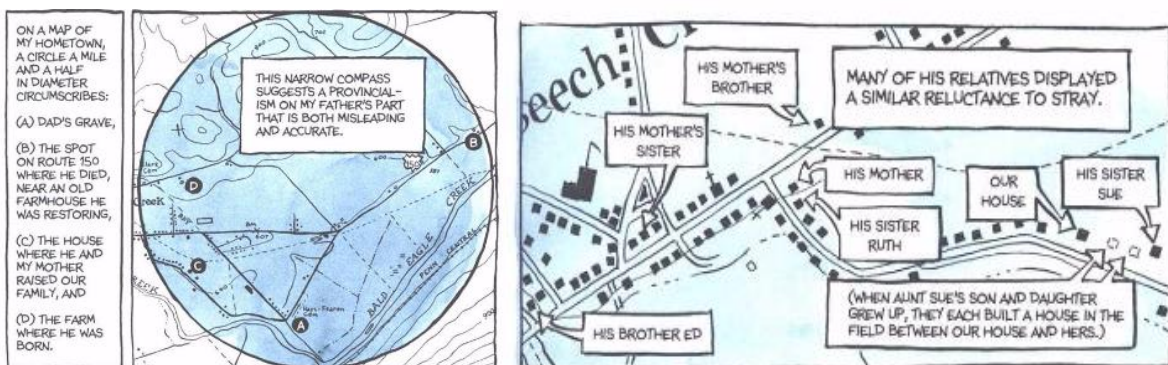
global cities can be seen as the strategic sites within which hierarchies of power and influence are both most striking and most open to challenge . . . it is within these cities that new forms of citizenship are now being forged which are both more reliant on mobility and more open to the juxtaposition of different cultures. (317)

Thrift appoints the city as a critical place for the formation of new kinds of connections and affiliations, despite being a space where systems of power are most consolidated. As he stresses, “global and other kinds of cities really can be, simultaneously, both sites of economic power and the focus of social movements which are the most able to dispute and disrupt this power” (317). Political hegemonies may bring a negative impact on metropolises and their citizens, but it also means an openness to resistance, in as much as a large number of individuals can articulate and form a collective force to confront those hegemonies.

For Viveka, leaving Trinidad to move to Canada could provide such place of articulation and receptiveness. Marriage, then, becomes paradoxically her entrapment into an unwanted social and gender role and the possibility of escape and transgression. For it is her relationship with Trevor that might enable mobility to a new place. Almeida also notes the

social dynamics of global cities, alluding to this duality of modern cosmopolitan areas that “supply the instruments for social insertion”¹² (my trans. 146), while also generating asymmetry in the urban fabric. In her words, a global city is “a strategic space for peripheral and underprivileged subjects, because it grants them a certain presence and positioning as subjects, although they remain almost always withdrawn from structures of power and without conditions of empowerment”¹³ (my trans; *Cartografias de gênero* 146). As part of a gender minority, Viveka must seek a web of support in a space where it is not necessary to restrain her expression of non-heteronormative sexuality.

The question of mobility and displacement can also be found in *Fun Home*. Bechdel too, in an analogous manner to Mootoo’s spatial practice of demarcating the novel’s territory, incorporates maps of her hometown, Beech Creek, in her work: (see fig. 9, 10 pp. 30, 31)



As the panels show, the process of outlining the space of the city in Bechdel’s narrative acts to illustrate the configuration around which her family orbits. The perimeter of Bruce’s social

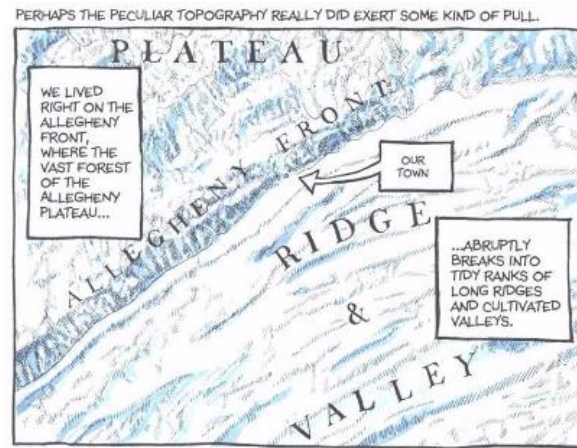
¹² “fornecer os instrumentos de inserção social.”

¹³ “a cidade global pode ser um espaço estratégico para os sujeitos periféricos e desprivilegiados, pois lhes permite certa presença e um posicionamento com sujeitos, embora permaneçam quase sempre aliados das estruturas de poder e sem condições de empoderamento.”

domain is defined by proximity, with all of his family members being located within less than two miles of distance. Alison is perplexed about the seeming paradox of her father's limited scope and parochial customs in opposition to his sophisticated cultural preferences. Narration reads:

This narrow compass suggests a provincialism on my father's part that is both misleading and accurate. Many of his relatives displayed a similar reluctance to stray. But it's puzzling why my urbane father, with his unwholesome interest in the decorative arts remained in this provincial hamlet. And why my cultured mother, who had studied acting in New York City would live there cheek by jowl with his family is more puzzling still. It was made clear that my brothers and I would not repeat their mistake. (31)

Alison regards her parents' rural living and their refined, artistic customs as an apparent contradiction, calling it a mistake she and her siblings are determined to avoid and conveying her resolution to depart from that place. Further on, the narrator returns to the topic of moving and draws a map again to reinforce the geographical markers that encircle her family (see fig. 11 pp. 126):



Alison recognizes the influence exerted on her father by the space in which he is situated. She conjectures whether his life could have been other had he been able to cross beyond the boundaries of his city: ““When I think about how my father's story might have turned out differently, a geographical relocation is usually involved. If only he'd been able to escape the gravitational tug of [the town] Beech Creek, I tell myself, his particular sun might not have set in so particular manner” (125). The narrator hints at an interconnection between her father’s suicide and the spatial limits of his geographic location. What is implied in this change of scenery for which Alison yearns is the alienation and lack of agency faced by Bruce in his hometown and a potential for the negotiation of desires and the self in a different place. For Alison, the pursuit of displacement stems from the emancipatory impulse to belong to a safe space for queer subjects. Mapping in *Fun Home* gives shape to the spatial delimitations of her hometown and stresses the narrator’s decision of ultimately moving away and settling in New York City.

This argumentation of mobility in the novels leads me to a discussion of the greater disparity between *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter*: the different possibilities for the

characters to have a future outside strict codes of moral conduct. Views on homosexual relationships are markedly opposed in the United States and Trinidad. Same-sex marriage is legally recognized in all states and in the US territory, whereas homosexuality itself is a criminalized act in Trinidad (as well as in most countries in the Caribbean area). Living in a country where same-sex unions are legally recognized and anti-discrimination laws are reinforced, contrary to a place in which homosexuality is a punishable offense, brings significantly different effects and implications to an individual's life. "He should have let his daughter do all that she wanted . . . But in a place like San Fernando, that was impossible" (Mootoo 4), tells the narrator, in reference to Valmiki. His assertion underlines the difficulty to act within the confines of his environment.

Large cosmopolitan metropolises like Toronto, New York, São Paulo, London, and Paris derive from specific contexts whose outcome is a moral and social framework that create spaces where diversity is more readily accepted. In "Queering the Map," Michael Brown and Larry Knopp map out the existence and attest to the social relevance of queer spaces. They maintain that these places "offe[r] a modicum of freedom and safety for those seeking to express and practice their dissident sexualities" (48). Queer places, like bars, clubs, coffee shops, student centers, have the liberating potential of uniting individuals undergoing similar kinds of oppression and afford them the opportunity to develop a sense of affinity and kinship. The notorious Stonewall riots that took place in New York City in the '70s are, in the theorists' opinion, a pivotal point for the progressive emergence of these friendly spaces. This points to the allusion that Alison in *Fun Home* sets out to college and moves to Manhattan. Coming into contact with a large variety of books on the subject in the library, joining study groups, attending conferences and social gatherings aiming to debate

the issue of sexuality, Bechdel becomes gradually involved in the activist scene and fully embraces her sexuality.

I have commented on the connotations implied in the title “Fun Home” as an ambiguous allusion to Alison’s experience with the domestic realm that works as a word play on the funeral home run by her family. The title “Valmiki’s Daughter” also bears discussion because it signals at a relation of subordination, as indicated by the possessive structure. Rather than simply being named “Viveka,” to whom the title refers, it points at an important relation of possession that subjects Viveka to her father. It is as though Viveka cannot be named, she is denied a subjectivity. The book’s name suggests that she is primarily a daughter, giving prime emphasis to family ties. Therefore, the novel being named “Valmiki’s Daughter” is significant because it is connected to one of its major thematic concerns of kinship, loyalty and societal demands.

Joan Borsa’s “Towards a Politics of Location: Rethinking Marginality,” echoing discourses on positionality, adequately reminds us of the importance of articulating our thought in relational terms to better examine the role location performs in our lives:

those places and spaces we inherit and occupy, which frame our lives in very specific and concrete ways, which are as much a part of our psyches as they are a physical or geographical placement. Where we live, how we live, our relation to the social systems and structures that surround us are deeply embedded parts of everything we do and remain integral both to our identity or sense of self and to our position or status within a larger cultural and representational field. (36)

Borsa highlights that the material conditions of the places we live in and come from have a

bearing on our subjectivities. She points to the relationship between individuals and the wider cultural and political structures shaping and affecting them. Geographical difference is thus directly related to how we perceive our experiences and act upon our desires. Being a queer subject in New York and in San Fernando considerably determines how one is likely to construct their gender identity. We will return to these issues of gender and sexuality in regarding *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter* in greater detail later on, in chapter 3.

2.3. Your Journey

The chapters into which *Valmiki's Daughter* is divided are named after the main characters and their focus is placed on each of them individually. Many of these sections are preceded by an introduction that narrates a synesthetic journey through the bustling streets of San Fernando. The narrator paints a lively and colorful picture of an intense urban scenario, streets swarming with businessmen and bums alike. Loud noises, soft music, car horns, strong odors, food smells, traffic, trucks, taxi drivers, animals, birds, nut sellers, and judges – a variety of antithetic elements are comprised into this moving scenario, creating a map that seeks to capture the urban area in its diverse entirety. Schröder discusses the production of space in literature by referring to this act of mapping. To her, mapping is “the naming, locating, and representing of space in relation to what in already know in the world” (11). It establishes a relationship with reality and imposes a human perspective on space, shaping how it is produced. A map provides a pattern that orders the seemingly boundlessness of space, offering an understanding of the environment around us. She also informs us that a map is always a representation, unavoidably bringing a dissonance between reality and the space represented, which may even result in contradictory ways to represent the same space:

[I]n mapping the space that surrounds us - whether in official maps or simply as descriptive orientations in our minds - we always add our own needs, our viewpoints, experiences and intentions to these maps. Hence, maps, topographies in general, are representations as well as productions of space, tools for the maintenance of a (spatial) status quo as well as for resistance and the creations of alternative spatial layouts. However, maps tend to solidify space since they impose a static order on a processual and ever-changing phenomenon and, therefore, it is important to question and redraw our (mental) maps all the time. Literature is one way of doing so. (12)

It is important to realize the determinant role literature plays in conceiving cartographies that acknowledge the complexity of space and is able to question its depictions. Through literature, the portrayal of space may gain a symbolic quality that proposes an intervention, perhaps even a subversion that resists hegemonic accounts of how a certain space conventionally appears. Besides, it allows for a discussion on how we perceive the places we inhabit in relation to other spaces communicated to us through fiction.

Covering significant ground, the space produced in Mootoo's narrative amounts to a plurality of voices, experiences and places. As the narrator charts the territory, she intervenes in the urban landscape, creating a map informed by the combination of manifold components which can be considered one of the major features of modern cities. The urban spaces these maps engender are congruent with our previous considerations on what characterizes the cosmopolitan centers of today as urban entities concentrating economic and political power, upon whose space people with distinct backgrounds, cultures, places and human activities are drawn together. Almeida remarks on the role of recent fiction produced by women authors in

engaging with these discourses about the city: “Contemporary women writers’ works delineate narratives that point to the perception of space as a plural, multifaceted and equally heterogeneous category”¹⁴ (my trans.; *Cartografias de gênero* 44). Mootoo’s work presents space along these terms, showing both an attempt to order – as the defining principle of representing space – but retaining an element of chaos. The inclusive cartography produced in the narrative contains the paradoxes that come to define the space of a city.

The second person narration employed in these introductory sections directly addresses the readers, as if guiding and instructing us on our surroundings, placing us within the narrative, showing what can be seen on the left side, on the right side, describing buildings, passersby, scents, sounds, sights, both pleasant and unpleasant, not following a specific path and often changing directions abruptly: “Look behind you, to the south, down Broadway Avenue. The avenue is wide, divided by a high island of tended grass, down which runs an uninterrupted row of Pride of Barbados trees. On the left and the right sides you will see two-storey concrete houses, all set behind concrete walls” (13). As the readers step into a look at San Fernando’s urban life, we are woven into the narrative and gain an understanding of the city as if we were part of that space.

Alison Donnell, in the essay “A Caribbean Queer,” comments on non-heteronormative experiences and possibilities of fulfilling one’s sexual identities in Mootoo’s novel. About these stances, she states: “it is no coincidence that our initial orientation as a reader is to Trinidadian Streets that refuse a straightforward journey and lead, rather, to a maze of entangled roots – for this is too, human landscape” (215). Donnell also remarks on the pluralism that marks our navigation through town, saying that in the “extended orientation

¹⁴ “obras de escritoras da contemporaneidade delineiam narrativas que apontam para a percepção do espaço como uma categoria plural, multifacetada e igualmente heterogênea.”

exercise that opens the novel, the narrator cannot help but document the signifiers of difference and heterogeneity that crowd the horizon” (215). What Donnell calls “signifiers of difference” that “represent the cultural *mélange* of Trinidad” (215) allude to the variety of cultures, ethnicities and nationalities that come into contact in an intense flow across the Caribbean territory described in the novel, in a depiction that gives visibility to, if not celebrates, this pulsating mixture.

If we, the readers, were to retrace our steps after the disorienting expedition laid out in these openings, it is possible that we would in fact find ourselves lost amid the chaotic street life. As Donnell points out, however, this erratic route through which we are taken, rather than dictating a direct, single passage, is more concerned with portraying the multiple possibilities that are presented during the experience of strolling freely:

If you stand on one of the triangular traffic islands at the top of Cancery Lane just in front of the San Fernando General Hospital . . . you would get the best, most all-encompassing views of the town. You would see that narrower secondary streets emanate from the central hub. *Not one is ever straight for long* (emphasis added). They angle, curve this way then that, dip or rise, and then shoot off a maze of smaller side streets. (Mootoo 7)

Ironically playing with the word “straight,” the narrative voice explores the lexical ambiguity of the term to refer both to the indirect and intricate course characterizing our path, and to hint at non-heterosexual gender identities. Significantly enough, it is precisely through space that this parallel is drawn. Deviation, in this case, means both the uncertain direction to be followed and sexual identifications which deviate from the heterosexist norm. By making this correspondence, the narrator points to the intrinsic relationship between gender and space. As

Donnell demonstrates, *Valmiki's Daughter* “catches a Caribbean queerness that maps a new meeting point between place and the possible” (214). A prism of sexual identities and desires are articulated within the space of the novel: Valmiki and his lover Saul, Valmiki’s past relationship with Tony, Viveka and her lover Anick, the ill-fated Merle Bedi. Mootoo’s text queers the spatial realm of the Caribbean, populating it with a wide collection of characters and queer subjects that defy Trinidadian social order. Donnell further explains that, by

rendering the commonplace sexual pluralism of Trinidad that blends “straight” and “gay” among other queer realities, [the novel] gives representation to a locally sensitive yet socially subversive repertoire of attachments and desires that exceeds identitarian categories and binaries. (214)

Representing non-compliant gender and sexual arrangements questions the borders of the system of social relations that govern Caribbean society.

Brown and Knopp attend to the importance of critically interpreting spatial data, such as maps, statistics and graphs. The authors’ approach the discipline of geography expressing their epistemological concerns over how space is represented. Based on the premise that identity, space, and place are interconnected, they “recognize cartography and mapping as key interventions in disrupting the heteronormativity of space” (42). Not only is urban space a construction, according to them, but its construction takes place along heteronormative parameters. Brown and Knopp’s cartography project contrasts urban space to queer space. Taking into consideration the modes of representing space, the article underlines the significance of queer geography, that is, the mapping and registering of queer spaces and places, in questioning “structures of homophobia and heteronormativity” and their hegemony over space. Thus, “spaces that are otherwise heteronormatively represented and imagined”

gain added meaning and intelligibility. They arrive at the conclusion that by “fixing and making visible queer spaces and places . . . a constitutive politics of individual and collective identity, community, history, and belonging is made possible” (55). Despite the tendency among dominant techniques involved in mapping a territory and sources of information to obliterate and silence the existence of spaces and places lying outside the norm, challenging the legitimacy of this hegemonic logic can give rise to other spaces that had been previously obscured. Which is why a queer approach can bring awareness to certain naturalized constructions. As Brown and Knopp comment: “Queer theory is not simply about destabilizing epistemologies and ontologies; it is also about pointing out how normal and neutral forms of representation insidiously closet queer folk” (55). Working in conjunction with a queer conceptual apparatus, the geographers are able to demonstrate how presumably impartial records of space carry political implications.

Although Brown and Knopp’s article is inserted in the field geographic research, the same can be argued about literary works. Cartographic representations face epistemological challenges, in that they must rely on conventional tools that quite often subscribe to claims of neutrality and universality that are, in fact, politically and ideologically charged. New perspectives, then, should be elaborated, to include social-spatial relations that exceed gender normative restrictions. *Valmiki’s Daughter*, in particular, through the creative act of bringing together a variety of subjects, places and practices in Mootoo’s writing opens up to new, different forms of knowledge. In “The Quest for an Identity in Shani Mootoo’s *Valmiki’s Daughter*,” Sissy Helff and Sanghamitra Dalal pay attention to the “narrative mapping” in the novel, affirming that “cartographies and landscapes are constantly invented and reinvented throughout the novel and are therefore not stable but in process” (75). Inventing, reinventing

and representing space is a literary exercise that enables the narrator to tell not one single story, but many.

2.4. Gentle Inclines and Declines

In *Valmiki's Daughter*, the lengthy and dense prefaces, or “multisensory literary navigation” (Donnell 215) establish the setting before making the reader acquainted with each character’s situation and conflicts. They come first, foregrounding, in rich detail, a description of the space of the city from which the conventional narrative is set apart. As it was mentioned earlier, an unusual second-person narration is employed in those parts, as opposed to the omniscient third person that tells the rest of the story. Switching narrative modes shifts the perspective and generates a sense of estrangement, as we become part of the action. A narration directed personally to the reader compels us to relate to that space on a more personal level and feel part of that intense influx of sensations and vivid landscape. We become the characters:

You’d hear theatrical steupses, and people hawking unabashedly, dredging the recesses of their craniums before spitting – should you open your eyes prematurely – amphibian like yellowish or greenish globs hard onto the sidewalk. You might be lucky enough, if you arrive at the right time of the day, to hear rounds of clarion bells on a descending partial scale (8)

Donnell remarks on this distinguishing style as an “almost exaggerated realism,” that “does not allow its readers to escape the world it describes. The commitment to realism becomes a means to insist on the recognition of a range of desiring lives that might otherwise be

avoided” (215). In her point of view, the excessive specificity by which the style of those sections is characterized is what grants them a unique realist status and admits the inclusion of a wide range of expressions of sexuality.

It is interesting to consider the placement of these “visual introduction[s]” (Mootoo 10) in relation to the overall textual structure of the novel. As they surface at the beginning of each chapter, they mark a decided rupture that interferes with the narrative arc. Transitioning from a focus on the characters and the story being told, the narrative puts into view the space of the city, its streets and their occupants, squares, commercial establishments, houses, institutions, buildings:

In due course, no hurry, after all, you’re operating on Trinidad time now - we ought to also pay a visit to at least one other part of the island, for to know one corner alone is not at all to know a place that is so miraculously varied geographically, environmentally, socially, linguistically. It sounds like a hodge-podge of a place, but it’s more like a well-seasoned, long-simmering stew. (Mootoo 25)

Occupying a significant portion of the novel, the position of these preliminary texts – before chapters devoted to a particular character – suggest that location is prior to the individual, coming first and laying the groundwork on which events and situations are to take place. Creating a sense of disjuncture, these stances frame the story, allowing characters to have narrative space only after the geographical journeys are described, in a textual arrangement that hints at a sense of them being confined to their surroundings. This movement is expressed not only in terms of how the plot eventually develops, but also as to how the text is structured. We come to learn that the characters in the novel, though craving

freedom and sexual liberation from Trinidadian severe social and moral codes, are ultimately bound to conform to such norms. Anick gets pregnant by her husband Nayan, Valmiki decides never to see his lover Saul again, and Viveka accepts Trevor's proposal to marry him. Non-heterosexual desires end up being contained over the maintenance of the family structure. Textual disposition in the narrative is thus connected to the significance of spatial relations, implying that the characters' actions are mediated – if not, to some extent, bound – by them.

Schröder notes the complexity of the relation between spaces, places and those inhabiting it, observing that spaces “are produced and influenced by those who inhabit, cross, or travel through them (by way of social practices and relations), spaces and places in turn influence these inhabitants. We are bound up in the construction and in the use of space while at the same time we are influenced by the spatial conditions around us” (25). A mutually constitutive exchange defines the experience of relating to the spatial dimension in our lives.

Valmiki's Daughter attests that a “spatial condition” profoundly influences those who must operate within a normative framework prevailing in the community to which they belong. The social status to which the Vishnus and other affluent Caribbean families are ostensibly attached entails an unrelenting need to protect and maintain it, often through an excessive concern with outward appearances and rigid codes of social conduct. Their lives are the outcome of reputation-based decisions that override individual choice. As Massey puts it: “identity is thought in terms of an articulation of the social relations in which a person/group is involved” (179). Our subjectivity is constructed in a broader connection with the social and political systems in which we are inserted. Viveka, Valmiki and Anick feel torn between a sense of loyalty toward their families and the urge to fulfill their yearnings,

yet the two options are seemingly mutually exclusive. The ultimate decision to comply with familial expectations also means complying with societal expectations in a wider sense.

On a series of online interviews, Shani Mootoo recurrently approaches her relationship with Trinidad. When talking about her literary work, she remarks that “There is no denying that Trinidad is so present . . . [the places she creates] are fictionalized spaces, but they are home . . . but, at the same time, I cannot work there, I cannot be there, it feels so distant.” And that “there is a sense of family and culture, closeness, a bond that I really yearn for. There’s a lot of going back to Trinidad, going back to the family, trying to pin down what I once knew so well.” Mootoo’s statement supports the notion that geography and space are intimately connected to the literary text. The author is paradoxically attached to her country and origins, but far too removed to revisit that land, a complex relation transposed to her writing. Feelings of ambiguity towards what she considers to be home can be identified in *Valmiki’s Daughter* and are reflected in the character of Viveka, who also experiences the contradiction of being simultaneously displaced and affectively affiliated to her culture and roots, while aware of the deeply embedded constraining circumstances of Caribbean society and family structures.

2.5. What the Top of Samaan Trees Look Like

The city and its ubiquitous presence in *Valmiki’s Daughter* explore the complex intersections of socio-spatial relations in Mootoo’s fictionalized depiction of the Trinidadian area. Space engendered in the narrative proposes a reflection that can be read in accordance with recent theorizations on the space of the city by social geographers and literary critics. Donnell asserts that the “Caribbean is a region hallmarked by cultural and ethnic

heterogeneity” (214). Diversity is represented through the territory charted in the narrative, with the tracing of an uneven route that incorporates dissonant voices, multiple subjects and plural spaces.

Spatial imagery and narrative structure are key literary devices in Mootoo’s narrative to give prominence to the representation of the space of modern cities as place of circulation, encounter, clash, conflict, and exchange. Power relations embedded in this dynamic are conveyed by the spatial layout of the urban landscape and emphasized by the textual layout. Interspersing sections with distinct narrative voices and focus form an allusive textual organization which relates to the book’s central symbolic structure.

Fun Home and *Valmiki’s Daughter* run in parallel directions in the concerns they share about mobility. Geographic relocation is a guiding theme in both literary works and is presented in Bechdel’s and Mootoo’s works as a means to achieve agency and freedom for queer identities. The protagonists Alison and Viveka seek to retain control over their futures and strive for a life in metropolitan settings that might create the proper conditions for sexual minority groups. By pointing at these correlations in the shaping of urban spaces like New York and Trinidad in both novels, I explore the contrasts between them, notably concerning how these individuals are differentially located in particular political settings and social systems. It is worth noting how geographical space is a marker of difference that constructs specific social realities in each narrative.

Nevertheless, the writing of space in these narratives produce relations that can resist, disrupt and formulate new meanings for places. As Schröder writes “Literature as a social practice is inextricably intertwined with the production of space . . . [I]t can be used to question spatial productions, notably those based on the norms and values of society's

dominating groups" (13). From a literary standpoint, an alternative conceptualization of the spatial realm challenges the predominant views of social processes that happen in spatial structures. Mootoo's creative endeavors are committed to a plural perspective of the space of the city that acknowledges and incorporates the multiplicity of lives and experiences in the Caribbean territory, although also making sure to expose the social contrasts and limitations permeating Trinidadian society. In a similar way, in *Fun Home*, Alison creates a division between her provincial hometown and the idea of cosmopolitanism. Characters who inhabit these urban spaces must continuously negotiate with a notion of belonging in relation to their families and communities that come into conflict with their sexual identities and desires.

Chapter 3

Alchemists of Appearance

For queerness can never define an identity;
it can only ever disturb one
(Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* 17)

3.1 Illicit Pleasures

“[Viveka] had no map of her future”, the narrator declares in *Valmiki’s Daughter* (360). In an assertion that combines cartography and temporality, the narrator in *Valmiki’s Daughter* adds a spatial dimension to how Viveka bleakly envisions her possibilities in Trinidad. Forming a link between time and place sets forth the idea that her location directly affects the ability to move forward as queer subject striving to express non-heteronormative desires. Previously on chapter 2, when referring to the representation of urban space and its significance in the novels, I traced a comparison between New York and San Fernando in regards to alternative prospects of living offered to sexual minorities. Taking into account the law criminalizing homosexuality effective in the Caribbean area and the gay liberation movements of which New York was the epicenter, these places markedly diverge in social paradigms and political settings. Issues surrounding the space of the home and the city had been addressed in the former chapters. I proceed now to explore the relation between those spatial categories and questions of gender and sexuality, with the aim of demonstrating how these issues closely intersect in both *Fun Home* and *Valmiki’s Daughter*.

Amin and Graham in “Spaces of Connection and Disconnection,” take a look at the

ambivalent tensions met in public spaces caused by the heterogeneity of multicultural encounters in the city, noting the “formation of new cultural identities and tendencies which, importantly, influence and transform existing identities,” adding that this “process of cultural ‘hybridization’, construction of new identities out of the mixture of older ones - can have effects across the urban social spectrum” (23). The emerging feminist and gay rights scene during the Stonewall riots period – along with other civil rights movements and anti-war activism taking place at that time – brought about cultural shifts that created the conditions for the acceptance of these new identities to which Amin and Graham refer. In a decade that saw the rise of new social policies and forms of collectivity, public space was accordingly modified to integrate them.

Queering Paradigms, a collection of essays compiling recent studies in the area of research related to gender politics, seeks to contest hegemonic ideologies about gender and sexuality prevalent in academic discourse – as well as also medical, political, religious, and juridical discourses. Within a queer framework, the work presents a variety of multi-disciplinary texts by scholars proposing parameters for the understanding of gender that overcome binary heterosexist epistemological structures. In “Queer Politics and Anti-Capitalism,” Benjamin Shepard is interested in the convergence of queer theory and practice. Shepard designates the public space of urban centers as a leading political arena for queer activism and practice: “Queers have a long history of appropriating space with an eye towards repurposing it for other uses” (85). As we have pointed out, the heteronormative construction of space excludes and rejects difference by establishing accepted norms of conduct and morality to which sexually marginalized groups are supposed to conform. Shepard remarks on the new perspective on public space put forth within this queer

subculture: “Rather than view urban space as an engine for economic growth, queer politics embraces the use of public space for social connection, democracy, community building” (85). New York notoriously stands as one of those spaces that has been appropriated and transformed by an activist scene engaged in questions surrounding public places. Gardens, parks, bars, bookshops were meetings points in which queer subjects “converged to share space and build common ground; these spaces cultivated alternative models for social relations” (Shepard 89). A shared sense of belonging and collective agency formed around those places, evidencing the inextricable relation between public space and democracy.

In *Fun Home*, I have discussed the image of the city of New York as a desired place to go to attain freedom. Alison recalls being in New York shortly after the Stonewall movements had taken place: “It had only been a few weeks since the Stonewall riots, I now realize. And while I acknowledge the absurdity of claiming a connection to that mythologized flashpoint, might not a lingering vibration, a quantum participle of rebellion, still have hung in the humectant air?” (104). Her growing fascination for the city’s diversity and cultural environment since young age eventually leads the protagonist to move there and get actively involved in the social collective existing outside the bounds of traditional gender expression and held together by a set of common political demands. Although Bechdel makes explicit that she nonetheless had to endure a considerable amount of humiliating events as a lesbian, it is interesting to note that, in a letter to her daughter, Bruce expresses his astonishment at the tolerance and progressive change that had taken place over the decades. “My world was quite limited,” (212) he writes, signaling at the past restraints he must have experienced as a homosexual at his time. Bruce’s declaration prompts Alison to speculate about whether her father would have adhered to the social norm of forming a heterosexual nuclear family had he

the freedom of her current days.

Acknowledging the complexities that form subjectivity, Susan Friedman presents her discourse on relationality by elaborating on the different movements and axis to which our identities are connected: “Identity depends upon a point of reference; as that point moves nomadically, so do the contours of identity, particularly as they relate to the structures of power” (22). Considering temporality and history as decisive categories in shaping an individual’s experience indicates that space should be understood alongside other intersections. Before the political interventions of the sixties and seventies in the U.S., whose results were more inclusive places and social practices, the cultural and moral framework entailed other forms of oppression. Alison’s subject position, then, despite being geographically located in the same place as her father, is historically privileged by the shifting social paradigms that took shape during her youth.

Challenges arising from rigid hegemonic codes of sexual behavior, as outlined in earlier chapters, constitute a main point of divergence between *Fun Home* and *Valmiki’s Daughter*. “Performing Lesbian Sexual Identity through Discourse,” from *Queering Paradigms*, analyses how lesbian-identified individuals construct their gender identities within the discursive realm. The authors Helen Sauntson and Liz Morrish aims their focus at how sexuality is performed according to specific, ever-shifting social contexts, arguing that:

[S]exual identity is a form of social identity, and in the case of lesbians and gays it has often been formed in the face of stigma, shame and exclusion. It goes beyond mere sexual object choice and desire. Sexual identity, rather than being an essential, pre-existing property, may be produced in relation to particular material conditions, and particular relations of power between those

whose interests are represented in structures such as government, culture, commerce. (28)

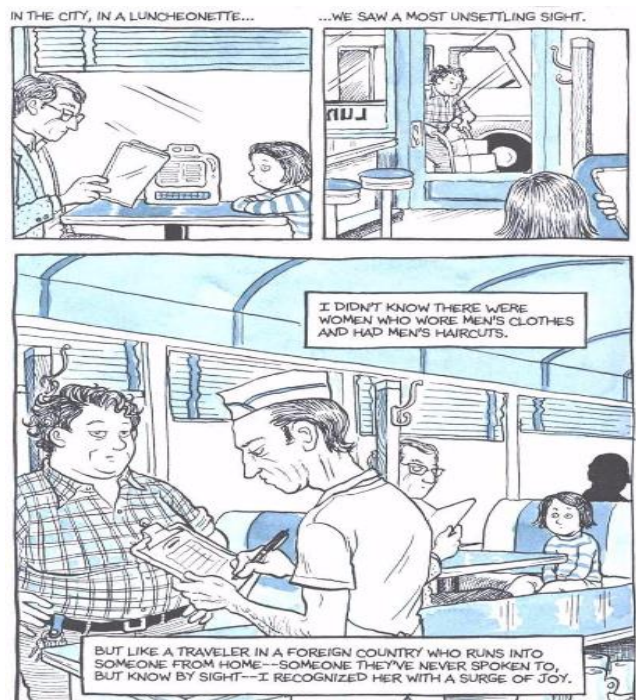
Sexuality is, therefore, not limited to a practice or a relationship, but it is also a set of attitudes and responses inseparable from the changing social contexts of which we are part. Every context is, furthermore, tied to wider social dynamics of power, which, in turn, issue cultural impositions that materially interfere in one's perception of gender and sexuality. Alison and Viveka, belonging to distinct geographical settings and social realities, occupy different subject positions within the particular cultural formations of the space they inhabit.

This opposition between different socio-cultural realities structuring gender relations in each novel is highlighted by two stances. In both *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter*, the main characters catch a first glimpse of discernable sexual alternatives that provoke a coming into awareness in each of them.

Tagging along at a business trip with her father at the age of five, Alison in *Fun Home* sees a woman whose hairstyle and outfit are not typically associated with femininity:

We saw a most unsettling sight. I didn't know there were women who wore men's clothes and had men's haircuts. But like a traveler in a foreign country who runs into someone from home . . . I recognized her with a surge of joy. Dad recognized her too . . . [T]he vision of the truck driving bulldoze sustained me through the years. As perhaps it haunted my father. (Bechdel 118)

The significance of this episode is visually evidenced in the narrative. As the unknown woman with whom Alison identifies surfaces in the story, the panel in which she appears prominently occupies the largest portion of the page, as contrary to the preceding small-sized panels (see fig. 12 pp. 118)



Her image looms large while the figures of Alison and her father appear diminished in the background. Reverberating throughout Alison's life, the sight of the woman is given relevance through both text and visual representation.

Further on, the Bechdels take a trip to New York, during which the fifteen-year-old Alison is introduced to the thriving community of people who have adopted a lifestyle outside convention in the notoriously bohemian Greenwich village. Seeing those men and women, who diverge so greatly from the norm, unabashedly strolling down the streets strikes her as peculiar, yet oddly enticing. Alison feels the impression of a unique familiarity and sense of identification when coming into contact with these groups (see fig. 13 pp. 189).

BUT THIS TIME, AT AGE FIFTEEN, I SAW
THE NEIGHBORHOOD IN A NEW LIGHT.



The existence and creation of queer spaces have the ability to “contest compulsory heterosexuality’s prerogative to determine normative sexual and spatial boundaries,” where characters are capable “thereby to reconstitute themselves and the geographies they occupy in anti-homophobic ways,” (6) as laid out in the introduction to *Queering Paradigms*. Collectivity and potential for agency are therefore closely linked. By recognizing herself as a potential member of that community, Alison’s perception transforms and her gender identity is gradually constructed in relation to those spaces.

3.2. Queering the abject

In counterpoint to the queer spaces of resistance and diversity observed by Alison, Viveka’s glimpse catches a far more unfavorable outcome of gender transgression. Merle Bedi’s figure permeates the narrative as an ominous reminder of the risk being taken by not acting in accordance with normative demands. Merle is a former close friend of Viveka’s. The two of them were classmates and belonged to similar social backgrounds as daughters of

affluent Trinidadian families. Her once-promising future as a talented musician is compromised after her secret desire for the same sex is let out. Lacking acceptance and support from her family and deprived of any means of livelihood, Merle is denied access to her own home, after which her descent into addiction and prostitution begins.

In the essay “Sex, Secrets, and Shani Mootoo’s Queer Families,” Evelyn O’Callaghan traces a comparison between Mootoo’s novels, concentrating mostly on the representation of family and same-sex desire in the Caribbean area. When discussing the menace posed by Merle Bedi to Trinidadian social order, she writes that the “cost of exposure haunts Viveka in the abject body of Merle Bedi . . . ostracized for lesbian leanings who surfaces periodically in the text. Merle is a crazed casualty of a code of sexual values, and her punishment by her family reinforces the terror of being unmasked as different” (8). Having to resort to sexual relations for money, Merle’s inability to keep her life in the private domain removes her from the right of having a private life altogether, and her desire for the same sex condemns her to have relations with the opposite sex for survival. Failing to keep desires private means that her body becomes public. The spectral presence of Merle Bedi in *Valmiki’s Daughter* emphasizes the themes of secrecy, freedom and the quest for mobility underlying the narrative.

Ruthlessly driven into otherness by the heteronormative structures that silence and regulate desire, Merle’s first appearance in the text embodies an utter state of abjection:

The woman is thin, with the depleted meagerness of the alcoholic. Her long black hair is oily and clumped. She wears what was once a white shirt, a shirt from not too long ago, but it is yellowed and soiled, and the trousers she wears, men’s trousers, are covered in dirt, dust, urine. They are several sizes too big

for her, held high above her waist with a belt, as if that were not enough, a length of heavy rope. She is barefoot. (Mootoo 22)

The representation of Merle's character is constructed in terms of being sullied, impure, and unclean, carried to the point of repulsiveness. She wears a shirt that, in a metaphorical allusion to her prosperous past, is now beyond repair. Her oversized pants that do not fit her properly hint at inadequacy. Additionally, being literally and figuratively barefoot is indicative of how she has been stripped of her humanity.

Julia Kristeva's conceptualization of the abject defines it as something strangely recognizable, yet it leaves a lasting impression of discomfort and aversion. "A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either" (2), the theorist formulates, basing on the binaries self/other, subject/ object, or I/not I as an anchoring point for her argument. Kristeva's proposals shed light on the abject condition into which Merle Bedi is forced. Cast off from society and removed from the cultural and social realm for being what Kristeva names "the improper," Merle stands in the border of citizenship as a result of the urge individuals have to be separate from unknown entities. Kristeva goes on to explain that it is "thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Difference is perceived as a threat because it disrupts the system and its coherence, bringing attention to the precariousness of the structures that organize moral values.

"[Viveka] had to train herself to remain above it, otherwise she would become like Merle. There simply had to be a place where she would fit in, and she would find that place"

(359), says the narrator in *Valmiki's Daughter*. In this passage, Viveka realizes that Merle's predicament could reflect her own and equates her to inappropriateness and unsuitability, as a condition to be avoided. This division between subject and object, self and other is what mainly characterizes the feeling of abjection. Drawing on this main dichotomy, Kristeva writes: "The abject has only one quality of the object - that of being opposed to I" (1). Recognizing the similarity of her situation and Merle's, efforts must be made so that she is cast as other. Sameness must become otherness.

Highlighted in the beginning of the paragraph above is also the pursuit of a new place of belonging. Considering the heteronormative framework of culture and politics, Sauntson and Morrish alert us of the "punitive social consequences for those who chose nonconformity to dominant forms of gendered behavior" (41). Fear of marginalization is frequent among the queer characters in *Valmiki's Daughter*. Transgressing gender limits in the space these characters inhabit could not only directly lead to social isolation but also to the liability of being assaulted. Coming public about their sexual identities "would cause a public scandal, and there would be the very real threat of physical harm" (Mootoo 346). Remaining in those places could be wholly unsafe for them both in terms of personal reputation and physical integrity.

As we have addressed earlier, on the contextual specificity of identity construction particularly in regard to queer subjects, "lesbian identities are always constructed and situated within specific social, cultural and political contexts" (41), note Sauntson and Morrish. Viveka occupies a social, cultural and political context, which is the same one that plunged Merle Bedi into vulnerability and powerlessness. By identifying with Merle as a queer subject whose identity is "bound to context," Viveka understands the restricted horizons of

possibility surrounding her. Linda McDowell is aware of the interplay between liberation and oppression in the public space, and considers that “the public arena, be it the literal spaces of city streets and parks or the metaphorical public spaces of urban institutions and networks of power and influence, are not equally accessible to all urban residents” (103). Merle Bedi loses access from the foundational systems of society, like home, family, and school. Disrupting the social order means that she is no longer allowed to be a part of it. In *Valmiki’s Daughter’s* representation of the city, the spatial division between public and private is blurred, since both realms are seen as dominated by heterosexist structures and institutions. Alternatively, *Fun Home* offers other possible living patterns provided by New York’s paradigmatic queer spaces that sharply contrast the places laid out in Mootoo’s novel.

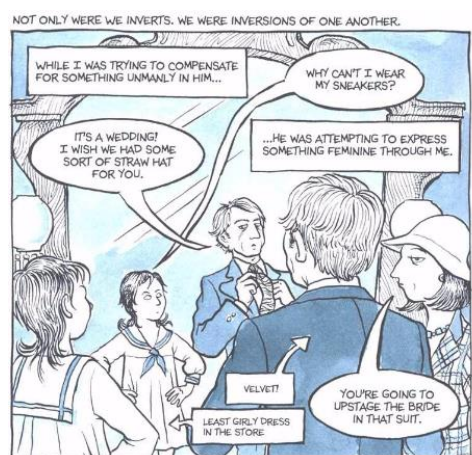
3.3. You Know Who I am

Constituting an identity within the parameters of heteronormative cultural codes not only represents being submitted to consistent efforts to silence and invisibilize desires, but it also carries the implication of social inscriptions on the body. In the Krishnus and Bechdel’s household, turbulent family relations are further complicated by repeated attempts to feminize the daughters (see figs. 11, 12 pp. 98, 96):



Viveka and Alison fail to correspond to the ideal socially prescribed form of gender behavior. Their choices of outfits, hairstyle, and other social practices show their refusal to embody characteristics that are in accordance with certain gender expectations for women. Consequently, the girls face reprimands and are persuaded to adopt more allegedly feminine features: “I had recently discovered some of dad’s old clothes. Putting on the formal shirt with its studs and cufflinks was a nearly mystical pleasure, like finding myself fluent in a language I’d never been taught” (Bechdel 182). Alison describes the delight of wearing a men’s outfit as something that prompted immediate identification. Bruce, notwithstanding, is reluctant to accept his daughter’s insistence to incorporate masculine attributes and, throughout the narrative, repeatedly reinforces hegemonic notions of gender expression as the model to be achieved.

Alison’s gender identity is perceived in direct relation to her father’s own construction of his sexuality (see fig. 14 pp. 98). Note that, in the figure below, the presence of the mirror indicates both the reflection and inversion to which the narrator refers.



In a queer father-daughter relationship, their sexualities are set in tension and established in opposition to one another:

I admired their masculine charms myself. Indeed, I had become a connoisseur of masculinity at an early age. I sense a chink in my family's armor, an undefended gap in the circle of our wagons which cried out, it seemed to me, for some plain, two-fisted sinew. I measured my father against the grimy deer hunters at the gas station uptown, with their yellow workboots and shorn-sheep haircuts. And where he fell short, I stepped in. (96)

Alison places herself as the antithesis of her dad, as if their expressions of gender and desire were mutually complementary: "I was Spartan to my father's Athenian. Modern to his Victorian. Butch to his nelly. Utilitarian to his aesthete" (15). In the passage in which she draws a comparison between her father and a virile muscular gunman on television, the scene is composed to create a comic and contrasting effect between the two figures (see fig. 15 pp. 95).



The TV set literally splits the panel in two, on the left side we see Bruce delicately handling a flower arrangement with meticulous care, whereas the manly actor in the Western film

bravely shoots an unseen enemy. *Fun Home*'s imagetic dimension conveys this division between the cultural meanings of masculine and feminine while also enabling their subversion.

Bechdel's narrative reverses gender stereotypes by associating the father with stereotypical feminine attributes while the daughter maintains traits traditionally attributed to masculinity: "We were inversions of one another. While I was trying to compensate for something unmanly in him, he was attempting to express something feminine through me. It was a war of cross-purposes doom to eternal escalation" (98). By neglecting to adequately perform their socially and culturally allocated roles, the characters in *Fun Home* destabilize normative values by which sexual identities come to be legitimized.

This destabilization, however, as it was mentioned, does not occur without permanent conflict and negotiation. Be it by ruthlessly demanding the daughters to change, insulting their appearance or causing distress in the family by pursuing an ideal image, gender positions are dictated, in both novels, by hegemonic binary discourses that assign a set of assumptions for each gender within the man/woman dichotomous frame. These assumptions often take shape as social impositions on the body.

Discussing gender is discussing the body. Almeida theorizes about the relation between women and their bodies, pointing to their political significance. She states that the body is primarily a discursive construction indelibly marked by gender, but also race and ethnicity. To her, the body is inscribed in texts written by women authors by whom the narratives produced promote a discussion on the gendered body and the politics and poetics of the body (101). As an entity characterized by political inscriptions, argues Almeida, the

body is a “space of individual determination and possible transgressions”¹⁵ (my trans.; *Cartografias de gênero* 101). Her argument is in line with Judith Butler’s claim that the body should be regarded “not as a ready surface awaiting signification, but as a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained” (44). Far from being a neutral and exempt object, the body “must be understood as a symbolic and material element in which social and historical factors are inscribed”¹⁶ (my trans.; Almeida, *Cartografias de gênero* 102). Expressed in our bodies are the many markers – of race, ethnicity, age, gender – that constitute our subjectivities. Body and identity are, therefore, as suggested by Almeida’s views, indissociable components of an individual.

Typically masculine traits are displayed in Alison’s and Viveka’s bodies, contradicting the conventional idea of “woman” in paradigmatic discourses of identity. Viveka’s intention to integrate the volleyball team is hindered by her parents’ prohibition because they implicitly fear the gendered associations of joining that space. Devika worries that Viveka lacks “a certain finesse one wanted in a girl [and] engaging in team sports and competition would only make her that much more ungainly, and whatever polish she had tried so hard to impart would certainly be erased” (49). To Devika, the physical strength and determination necessary to play sports is deemed inappropriate to her notion of femininity.

In an association between individuals’ identities and the spaces they occupy, McDowell highlights “the way in which the spatial location of women is used to construct them as certain sorts of women” (112). A woman’s position in space is used as grounds for inferring about important aspects of her character, since certain places bring specific

¹⁵ “espaço de determinação individual e de possíveis transgressões.”

¹⁶ “deve ser entendido como um elemento simbólico e material no qual fatores sociais e históricos são inscritos.”

connotations. “Location within particular spaces affects the social identity of the occupant; or, in other words, identity may be read off from the space being occupied” (115), adds McDowell, establishing the “interconnections between social and spatial identities” (111). Training volleyball in an all-female team, in the perspective of Viveka’s parents, enables this correlation between social practice, space, and sexual identity. Valmiki’s and Devika’s inflexible denial makes a coded allusion to sexuality, in that they believe in the gender signifiers implicated in the action of playing sports in a gym with other women.

In the first chapter, we mention Valmiki’s relation to the forest and his hunting circle. He finds solace in being in the wilderness with his friends: “such comradery made Valmiki bristle with life” (58) because he is able to connect in a “primal way” with his colleagues. The narrative quickly uncovers that Valmiki has no striking hunting abilities, revealing that his attraction to the practice is a convenient opportunity to explore his relationship with his partner Saul. Sauntson and Morrish address the construction of identity within changing situations and circumstances, remarking that “gender codes are explicitly evoked as a means of constructing certain kinds of sexual identities” (40). Male bonding and physical proximity that hunting entails is socially agreed upon within those particular conditions, yet they would be otherwise improper in different contexts. A typically masculine activity such as hunting allows for the shared intimacy of the experience of being in the wild, as long as they are conducted within the appropriate realm. Homosocial affection must be hence legitimated by a virile practice. Valmiki feels, then, compelled to actively discourage his daughter to pursue the practice of sports. Conscious of the homoerotic undertones implied in women’s volleyball training, he is able to discern, on a personal level, how representative these physical encounters might be.

“She thought of her parents holding her back from participating in sports, trying to break and redesign her so that she didn’t bring notice to herself and shame to them” (359), comments Viveka. Continuous attempts to “break and redesign her” indicate that Viveka cannot succeed at playing the role she is supposed to, and the endeavor to meet the demands of gender normativity must come at the cost of unrelenting repetition. The social and discursive regulation of sexuality needs to be routinely reinforced by hegemonic structures of power. In the preface to *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler alludes to the inherent ambiguity and instability of gender, holding that “gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real”. She theoretically elaborates her conception of gender departing from the figure of the drag queen as subjects who “destabiliz[e] the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates” (xxviii). Butler’s inquiry questions the very basis of gender construction by exposing that drags do not impersonate gender because gender is in itself a socially constructed performance.

Feminist criticism has been consistently calling attention to the constructedness and performativity of gender difference, chief among which is the critic and philosopher Judith Butler. Butler, along with major proponents in the field of gender studies like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Teresa de Lauretis, and Monique Wittig, have demonstrated that sexuality, gender and desire do not necessarily follow a relation of continuity and that gender identities are the outcome of the complex interaction between those categories within a normative framework of compulsory heterosexuality. Articulating the links between sex and gender, Butler also contests the notion of sex being a natural, self-evident, anatomic component whereas social and cultural meanings are embedded in gender:

Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established . . . [G]ender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “pre-discursive,” prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts. This construction of “sex” as the radically unconstructed. (11)

Sex does not take precedence over gender as a biological entity whose organic essence is subsequently affected by discourse. Butler reveals, thereby, the constructed nature of both categories. Drawing from a post-structural critical approach, the theorist has established the groundwork for how sexuality is understood by questioning epistemological systems and criticizing the notion of identity categories. Her considerations are, then, an important source for the study of *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter*.

Binary rationality underlying Western thought is also an object of critique in Butler's formulations. Dichotomies separating men/women that govern dominant discourses hinge on essentialist views about gender that hierarchically tend to privilege masculinity. Butler's theoretical debate opens up new perspectives for rethinking absolute claims about gender and sexuality that are tied to larger mechanisms of social control: “The univocity of sex, the internal coherence of gender, and the binary framework for both sex and gender are considered throughout as regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression” (44). Relying upon the argument of the construction of categories of identity, she develops the affirmation that it is precisely in this detected ambiguity and instability that lies the critical opportunity for subverting those

systems of oppression. I can benefit from Butler's remarks to identify the ruptures and fractures found in these fictive conceptions of sex and gender to interpret representations of sexuality in the novels, that is, demonstrating how these acts of repetition and expectations of unity and coherence are doomed to fail.

Sexuality and identity are inextricably interwoven. Our subjectivities are constructed within a system of social relations and cultural codes. Judith Butler's conceptual discussion around gender performativity, the heterosexual matrix, and asymmetric binary oppositions resonate deeply in the area of queer studies. In the introductory section of *Queering Paradigms*, Burkhard Scherer, acknowledging Butler's proposal, examines the role of queer theory in questioning the politics of identity and sexual paradigms:

Queer theory challenges the prevailing 'heteronormativity' . . . i.e. the hegemonic discourse of the assumption of heterosexuality - by fundamentally drawing into question any assumed identitarian stability of gender and sexuality. Instead, queer thought stresses the universal fluidity of gender and sexuality and their performativity (in the sense elaborated by Judith Butler) through constant constructive reinvention through intentional or non-intentional performance of identity. (1)

Queer as a mode of theorizing aims directly at an epistemological reflection regarding identitarian discourses by which sexuality is dictated, while also pointing the issue of the discursive construction of gender. Societal norms hold heterosexuality as the norm against which other subjectivities lying in the sexuality spectrum should be measured and regulated. The mandatory character of the heterosexual rhetoric also rests at the center of queer theory's concerns. A queer theoretical framework, then, provides a useful resource for a reading of

Fun Home and *Valmiki's Daughter* and their core theme of gender and sexuality. Drawing upon this debate assists in the understanding of how this boundary of the characters' social identities is negotiated against hegemonic constructs.

3.4. Delightful and Terrifying Sensations

Compulsory heterosexuality creates the requirement that heterosexual desire is set as the normal whereas non-normative expressions are cast as the inadequate other. Butler evaluates the power dynamics involved in producing claims to originality and authenticity and consolidating univocal conceptions of sexuality. She exposes that "the 'unity' of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality". As an ongoing process of reification, the "force of this practice is, through an exclusionary apparatus of production, to restrict the relative meanings of 'heterosexuality,' 'homosexuality', and 'bisexuality' through an exclusionary apparatus of production" (42). The continuous repetition of a heterosexist logic is what naturalizes hegemonic sexuality and gives the false impression of legitimacy. Alison's and Viveka's expression of sexuality is constantly at odds with compulsory assumptions of gender and sex.

Although trying to operate in the confines of traditional gender and sexual roles engendered by the pervasiveness of heterosexist discourses, Viveka's growing awareness of her same-sex attraction renders her unable to feel pleasure in a heterosexual relation, as evidenced by the sharp opposition between Viveka's relationship with other men and her romance with Anick. It can be suggested that her joyless romance with Elliot and Trevor is the effect of the universally presumed heterosexuality that compelled her into performing sexuality within established models, thus being involved in relationships with men.

About the practices of control that determine gender norms, Butler writes that the “heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions” and maintains that the “cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not “follow” from either sex or gender” (23). As a woman, Viveka is expected to engage in relations with the opposite sex as a natural and intrinsic part of her gender expression. Dominant cultural and political forms of intelligibility must exclude other manifestations of desire and identity because they constitute “developmental failures or logical impossibilities” (Butler 24). Queer identities that remain a reality, despite persistent efforts to standardize sexual meanings, cause a rupture in that social and political system and expand the limits of discursive practices that construct sexuality.

Descriptions of intimacy in *Valmiki's Daughter* follow different strands of representation according to each partner. Viveka's emotional involvement with Anick is narrated in descriptive detail, evoking the rich, sensorial language used to portray the space of the city in the text “. Even conversations with her take primacy over other interactions: “This kind of exchange seemed, oddly, more intimate to Viveka than when she and Elliot had kissed” (258). In *Fun Home*, drawings include graphic content when showing Alison relating to her girlfriend (see fig 15, 16 pp. 81, 214):



Like in Bechdel's narrative, the scenes containing lesbian sexual acts in Mootoo's novel explicitly bring bodies, practices and pleasures into view: "her fingers sliding inside Anick, of Anick gasping and thrusting against her" (359). Passages depicting her relationship with Trevor, however, are marked by a sense of lack and incompleteness, and their communication is awkward and stiff: "Her greeting was a quick, nervous embrace" (378). For the first time she has sexual relations with him – in fact, with a man – a detailed description is omitted, unlike her experiences with Anick, and what we have instead is an anticlimactic conclusion. The previously smooth and soft tenderness of touching Anick's skin, in a metonymic replacement, gives way to the roughness and asperity of sand. Offensive odors "of seaweed when it begins to decay" (389) invade the air. Ending with an aching sensation (pain being the opposite of pleasure), the act uneasily takes place during "a blast of dull, suffocating heat" (378), after which there is an "unrelenting attack of swarm after swarm of nasty black flies" (390). As the quotes suggest, Viveka frames her remarks in grotesque terms. The ruthless presence of insects, heat and foul scents take on allegorical significance to represent the upsetting experience and convey Viveka's physical and emotional

disconnection.

Viveka's indifference and detachment towards heterosexual sex acts demonstrate the inefficacy of attempting to articulate desire according to normative ideologies that operate on the construction of her gender identity. Questioning ideas of gender, sex, and sexuality as a coherently unified system anchored in binary premises, Butler argues that this "conception of gender presupposes not only a causal relation among sex, gender, and desire, but suggests as well that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire" (30). This assertion points to the discontinuity between these categories. Gender and desire, thus, do not derive from sex, a fiction sustained by a heterosexist mentality.

Family values lie at the core of compulsory heteronormativity's discourse. Prevalent scientific rhetoric regard sexuality as strictly functional from a reproductive point of view, often holding that homosexuality and other non-conventional acts are unnatural. Outside this structure lie queer sexualities, whose sexual practices have seemingly no biological purpose, in a normative perspective. Beatriz Preciado's *Manifesto contrassexual* presents the contradictions concerning sexuality and desire. Addressing the heterosexual system, she emphasizes that:

Sex, as an organ and practice, is neither a precise biological place nor a natural drive. Sex is a technology of heterosocial domination that reduces the body to erogenous zones due to an asymmetric distribution of power between the genders (feminine/masculine), matching certain affections with certain organs, certain sensations with certain anatomical reactions.¹⁷ (my trans.; 25)

¹⁷ "o sexo, como órgão e prática, não é nem um lugar biológico preciso nem uma pulsão natural. O sexo é um tecnologia de dominação heterosocial que reduz o corpo a zonas erógenas em função de uma distribuição assimétrica de poder entre os gêneros (feminino/masculino), fazendo

The body is conditioned to sexual practices that allow certain parts to be explored while others that do not belong to the reproductive system must be obliterated. This operation, to Preciado, fragments the body and consists of a process of reduction that "extracts certain parts of the body and isolates them to make them sexual signifiers"¹⁸ (my trans.; 26). Pleasure and desire are severely restricted to a phallogentric configuration that creates sexual difference and allocates specific body parts to be "applied" in sex acts, while reproaching other practices.

As a social contract and institution, the notion of family as a foundational basis of society's structure could be menaced by the existence of desires that do not follow procreational ends. Growing up, getting married and having children as "paradigmatic markers of life experience" (Halberstam 2) are perceived as natural stages of human activity and a necessary step to the insurance of the continuity of our species. Then, "the practice of homosexuality [is] contrary to the heteronormative goals of human life: marriage, fatherhood and motherhood" (Motswapong 105). Any configuration that is not destined to this function threatens to dismantle the family cell and must be placed under control. These "heterosexist family values and the sense of tradition will surely be the tools of oppression for those intent on excluding gay people from the framework of . . . society" (Motswapong 114). Pervasive models of family as a guiding moral principle of society can work as an ideological apparatus to suppress desires. Normative ideals of family thus extend to an individual's sexuality. In the novels, family relations lie at the center of the stories as an unstable social unit that both incorporates and counters ideal family standards.

coincidir certos afetos com determinados órgãos, certas sensações com determinadas reações anatómicas."

¹⁸ "extraí determinadas partes do corpo e isolá-las para fazer delas significantes sexuais."

3.5. Savant of Surface

Prevalent gender discourses construct women as feminine, delicate, subservient, among other stereotypical traits. Queer and feminist theory criticize essentialist notions of difference between genders, the “rhetoric of oppositionality” (Garcia 14) that guides Western rationality. As addressed before, Viveka and Alison, much to the resentment of their parents, fail to successfully perform ideal femininity within the standards of hegemonic cultural codes. Viveka “wasn't charming. She wasn't willing to flatter,” (66) contradicting the key assumptions that endorse how gender should be expressed by a woman. Alison similarly experiences frequent confrontation with her father about her mannish and unladylike attributes: “What are you afraid of, being beautiful? Put [the pearls] on, goddamn it!” (99) (see fig. 16 pp. 99). Bruce even phrases his request in terms of beauty, linking femininity and attractiveness:



As Judith Butler questions in the preface to *Gender Trouble* “being female constitute[s] a ‘natural fact’ or a cultural performance, or is ‘naturalness’ constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex”

(xxix). Gendered attitudes and signifiers are then reified through persistent discursive mechanisms that operate on the mind and body and conceal their artificialness by presenting themselves as natural and substantial.

Gender-based distinctions of behavior, labor, and physical characteristics are a rigidly regulated and controlled political configuration of a patriarchal heterosexist framework. The father figures Valmiki and Bruce must respond to these cultural meanings of gender as patriarchs inserted in these dominant power structures of heteronormative institutions. Being men, these characters construct their subjectivities precisely in relation to the hierarchical system of gender positions and fully exercise and take advantage of the privileged rights and conditions of a male-dominated society. The expression of their desires lies, however, outside the social norm, in that same-sex attraction is at odds with binary models of sexuality.

Sauntson and Morrish refer to an operation of “structural marginalization” by claiming “heterosexual identities are institutionally authorized” whereas it occurs “a process of illegitimation whereby homosexual identities are marginalized and denied institutional recognition” (35). Heteronormative desires and social identities are culturally sanctioned, dismissing minority subjects as not legitimized. The fathers in *Valmiki's Daughter* and *Fun Home* act in conformity with this system of dominant cultural codes, aware of the fragility of their homosexual identities while simultaneously understanding their place of power in the structure of the family. Queer identities and masculine dominance are thus held in tension.

Occupying a paradoxical subject position, Bruce and Valmiki are characterized by a duplicity that destabilizes univocal significations of patriarchal control. In *Feminism and Geography*, Gillian Rose considers that “[p]atriarchal power is not monolithically stable and if the enemy is differentiated and fluid, then so must be the forms of resistance”. Her critique

points to the different and various forms of oppression that heterogeneously take place across a “complex series of (historically and geographically specific) discursive positions, relations and practices” (11) within which men and women are located. In *Valmiki’s Daughter* and *Fun Home*, we are addressing ambivalent patriarchal figures whose identity constituents place them outside sexual normativity yet within a relationship of power rooted in masculine domination, a dualism that complicates a Cartesian logic of oppressed/oppressor.

Pursuing similar reasoning, Judith Butler argues for critical evaluation of feminist claims and supports an idea of a transversal politics of identity that rejects patriarchy as a unified whole:

The very notion of “patriarchy” has threatened to become a universalizing concept that overrides or reduces distinct articulations of gender asymmetry in different cultural contexts. As feminism has sought to become integrally related to struggles against racial and colonialist oppression, it has become increasingly important to resist the colonizing epistemological strategy that would subordinate different configurations of domination under the rubric of a transcultural notion of patriarchy. (46)

Totalizing accounts of patriarchal rule overlook the multiple and shifting subjectivities of those whose markers of identity are constituted by “the interplay of different axes of power and powerlessness” (Friedman 23). The narratives to which I refer present the negotiation of these categories of subject positions in the father figures as a conflictual process.

“And despite the tyrannical power with which he held sway, it was clear to me that my father was a big sissy” (97), notes the narrative voice in *Fun Home*, satirically drawing on this ambiguity manifested in Bruce to locate him in the interstice of privilege and

vulnerability. My discussion in chapter 1 aimed its gaze at the space of the home, stressing how Alison’s relationship with her father was built in connection to her perception of the domestic space (see fig. 17 pp. 6).



Bruce is symbolically linked to images of the house. Robin Lydenberg, in the article “Under Construction” writes:

Bruce’s labors always hint at something missing or amiss, a suggestion of masquerade or cover-up that hides some gender ‘deficit’ or transgression. Bechdel represents her father shirtless and in cut-off jeans, with tools in his belt and lumber on his back, ‘smelling of sawdust and sweat’ but also ‘of designer cologne, an incongruity that perhaps signals something hidden beneath the stereotypically masculine role of the construction worker. (59)

As mentioned, parallels between Bruce and his prized Victorian home are amply employed in Bechdel’s story, implying that the careful and never-ending process of remodeling could be read as an attempt to hide his inner contradiction, “The meticulous, period interiors were expressly designed to conceal [the shame and self-loathing],” (Bechdel 20) reinforced by Lydenberg’s assertion that “[d]espite his meticulous renovation of the house, Bechdel’s

behavior also leaves evidence of the turmoil lurking just beneath its carefully maintained facade” (64). Lydenberg states that “Bruce’s on-going home renovations as the backdrop to the struggles with gender identity and sexuality” (58), although perhaps the word “backdrop” is not sufficient to describe the central function the domestic space performs, as the renovations and the house itself exceed the mere role as a stage for narrative action and take on a more powerful and metaphoric meaning, working as a mask, a veneer for his long-suppressed uneasiness and yearnings in regards to his queer subjectivity.

Describing her relation to her home, the narrator puts it: “I developed a contempt for useless ornament . . . [I]f anything, they obscured function. They were embellishments in the worst sense, they were lies. My father began to seem morally suspect to me. . . He used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear what they were not” (Bechdel 16). The profuse portrayal of ornate lamps, large bookcases, lavish curtains, elaborate furnishings, intricate wallpaper patterns, among several other obtrusive household items, along with the strenuous, continuous renewal of the Victorian mansion reveal Bruce’s relentless pursuit of perfection as deception. Seeking to disguise his inadequacy, he sustains a social masquerade. A literal and figurative construction of the home and the self in terms of pretense represent the fragility of constructing sexual and gender identities within normative frames.

Concepts associated to Bruce’s construction, such as artifice, masquerade, dissimulation, artificialness, and contrivance directly refer us to Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity. The fathers’ excessive concern with carefully manufacturing appearances reminds us of the constitution of sexual and gender identities to which the author alludes: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly

rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (44). Artificially producing a notion of reality, discursive, and social practices encode gender-based cultural meanings naturalized through consistent repetition, as evidenced by the father figures in the novels.

These “naturalized and reified notions of gender” that, as we have seen, within a hierarchical matrix of power “support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power” (Butler 44) also appear in Valmiki’s embodiment of a prescribed gender role that is involved in a contrived fabrication of masculinity. His overall conduct in the narrative as an affluent and upstanding Trinidadian citizen results in the repeated effort to uphold the Krishnu family name and, by extension, his own name and image. Despite his same-sex attraction, Valmiki carries out affairs with women as well, as a means of dispelling rumors: “It was the suggestion of his . . . status with the ladies . . . [that] worked against suspicions of who and what he was at heart. A man was certainly admired by men and women for a show of his virility” (Mootoo 42). Valmiki defines his gender identity with reference to aggressive and predatory displays of sexuality that commonly inform models of male virility in alliance with heteronormative societal values.

According to Donnell, Valmiki is “a man of unfulfilled yearnings whose sexual transgression in the form of liaisons with local white women sit in complicated relation to his same-sex desire for a local working class man of [Indian] descent” (221). His endeavors to make up for his transgressive needs are reflected in his exaggerated manly behavior:

He made a point of engaging in disparaging jokes about women and ‘faggots’. He developed the affectation of spitting, velocity and distance becoming *markers of his manhood* (emphasis added). He launched, too, into a display at

school and in front of his parents, of noticing girls, commenting almost to the point of excess, sometimes with a lewdness that did not suit him (Mootoo 55)

Valmiki's "markers of manhood" function as a camouflage to overcompensate and conceal repressed longings closely mirrored by Bruce Bechdel's "skillful artifice" in *Fun Home*. This parodic imitation of masculinity is crucial to Butler's argument that "heterosexuality offers normative sexual positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody, and the persistent failure to identify fully and without incoherence with these positions reveals heterosexuality itself not only as a compulsory law, but as an inevitable comedy." To the theorist, heterosexuality is "both a compulsory system and an intrinsic comedy, a constant parody of itself" (155). Bruce and Valmiki, failing to find identification with heterosexist gender requirements, engage in a game of appearances and deceit to meet the demands of sexual discursive constructs that simulate originality.

Race is another issue that emerges when approaching the tactics of deception wielded by Valmiki. In the racially diverse yet stratified Trinidad, skin color remains a defining characteristic of one's social and economic position: "You might or might not have noticed, depending on where you have dropped from, that the people on the streets are mostly of Indian and of African origin. Indian or black. You'd likely notice that most beggars are Indian. But you might not" (Mootoo 10). Being white, black or of Indian ancestry in Trinidad are racial signifiers that carry social connotations. Descending from a wealthy lineage of Indian partners who bought off land from a French family and made a fortune selling off small portions of the estate, Valmiki's heritage establishes him as high-ranking in the social standing. To ensure his status and safeguard his manhood within the ties of his neighborhood and community, he prides himself on the extramarital encounters he holds, particularly with

white women. In a racial system that privileges white women over other ethnic groups, Valmiki's demonstration of his prowess is indicative of the prevalent racial relations underlying Trinidadian culture. "They were – the exception being his wife – foreign white women, all beautiful in the way men commonly – or common men – like their women" (41). The power dynamics that shape this interaction brings to light the societal standards that define racial structure. Engaging in affairs with white women is a tool of social legitimacy in a system of stratification whereby whiteness is a preferable constituent of identity over other racial and ethnic backgrounds in *Valmiki's Daughter*.

Bruce and Valmiki assert their authority within the realm of their households and occupy dominant subject positions in that particular context. Their patriarchal dominance is socially sustained through power mechanisms structured by a hierarchical logic of gender binarism. Recurrent efforts to stylize and feminize their daughter's features are complicit with gender oppression and the heterosexist norm. As a consequence of these normative cultural codes, the trope of migrating elsewhere is frequent in *Valmiki's Daughter* to signify Viveka's spatial limitation within the deeply ingrained Caribbean moral frame. My aim here is not, however, to pose a deterministic criticism of Trinidadian society or hold the father figures accountable for operating in the service of patriarchy and heteronormativity. I seek, instead, to recognize the firmly rooted homophobia and its insidious effects and to identify the cultural norms and patterns that discursively regulate, control and construct our gender and sexual identities.

What interests me also is to examine space as a social and material condition that carries restraints but also transgressive possibilities. By understanding that Alison is able to establish herself in New York City, a cosmopolitan space in which the diverse range of

sexual and gender identities are more freely expressed, I might bring light into the topic of the cities and consider the opportunities for agency and conditions of empowerment they provide. Furthermore, spatial configurations and boundaries are a relation through which queer subjectivities are constituted. The liminal zone within which Bruce and Valmiki are located as patriarchal queer subjects defy monolithic significations of gender, laying bare that sexuality is not a single, unified category, although normative discourses might suggest otherwise. How desire is articulated and gender identities negotiated across cultural and political practices is one of the main concerns of epistemological approaches put forward by queer and feminist theory and politics. Queerness can function, therefore, as a disruptive force that refuses an oppositional logic, displaces hegemonies and, ultimately queers paradigms.

Concluding Remarks

The “new geographics figures identity as a historically embedded site, a positionality, a location, a standpoint, a terrain, an intersection, a network, a crossroads of multiply situated knowledges,” writes Susan Friedman, stressing the importance of relational thinking for understanding the formation of subjectivities (19). Her geographical discourse of identity puts forth a rhetoric of positionality that sets a new paradigm for viewing “identity as the product of complex intersections and locations” (20). History, culture, place, gender, race, social position, along with other constituents, come to define an individual’s expression of self and shape social relations.

Friedman’s theoretical discussion elects narratives as a pivotal point around which to base her debate on feminism, identity, difference and geography. “[I]dentity is literally unthinkable without narrative” (8), claims the author. Narrative texts, to her, whether they are classified as visual, oral, written, historical or fictional accounts, are all cultural records engaged in the construction of meaning. Being a manifestation of culture, they might engender, reiterate or contest values, rules and belief systems that constitute a given reality. In her words: “Cultural narratives also tell the strategic plots of interaction and resistance as groups and individuals negotiate with and against hegemonic scripts and histories” (9). As systems of representation and signification, these texts give voice to multiple subjects and heterogeneous stories and allow the readers for an encounter with other identities, spaces, practices and ideologies. Literature, then, may be seen as an exercise in alterity.

Since literary texts can challenge, create new meanings and provide alternatives discourses, to examine works of literature is to enter the field of knowledge production and

consider how they relate or rupture with hegemonic modes of representation. Placing *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter* in interaction is to propose an encounter between the many lives, cultures, desires and places that figure in the novels. The aim at establishing this dialogue has been to map the common ground they share while also examining stances whereby they run in distinct directions. It is by holding these works in proximity that we are able to take a closer look at the thematic concerns they share and find the means through which to advance a larger discussion on gender, sexuality, and space, central elements in the narratives.

Fathers and daughters articulating their desires outside the normative order, fractured family ties, gender performativity, patriarchal relationship dynamics, the prominence of the spatial realms and spatial relations are common issues that emerge significantly in Bechdel's and Mootoo's works. The linkage between the texts has offered the chance for an analytical reflection on how the concepts listed above are presented in the literary works and how a discourse of positionality operates as a critical practice to dialogically examine the cultural conditions and multiple axes that form the identities of subjects inhabiting the space of the narratives.

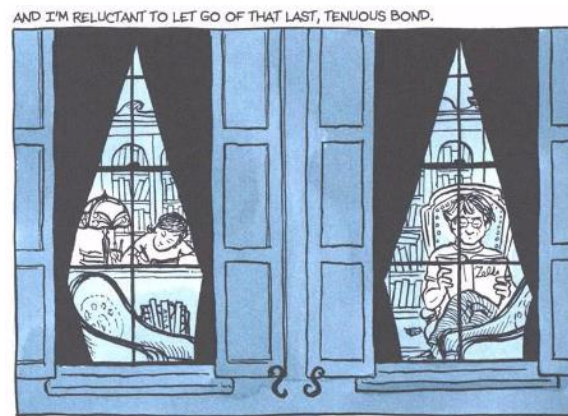
In an effort to avoid simplifications, essentializations and totalizing perspectives on gender, race, class, politics and location, it has been crucial to acknowledge difference as a complex and diverse notion that operates on identity in a manifold web of interconnections. As Friedman writes, "the discourse of multiple positionality fosters an interactional analysis of identity as the product of interdependent systems of alterity" (21). Geography and space play a determinant role to the notion of alterity. To approach the notion of identity formation and systems of difference, it is key to view that subjectivities are spatialized and that space is

a “situational marker of identity” (Friedman 23). Individuals come to be formed in relation to locational specificities that configure social and cultural realities. Bechdel’s graphic memoir moves back and forth between her small Pennsylvanian hometown and New York City. *Valmiki’s Daughter* takes place in the city of San Fernando in Trinidad and Tobago. Examining the national boundaries within which these stories are situated is to acknowledge that spaces and places inform and are mutually informed by particular processes, social conditions and cultural codes and, in doing so, mediate individuals and their subjectivities in different ways.

I have established that the novels with which I work place great emphasis in the representation of the spatial realm. Through textual elements, visual and literary devices, setting is foregrounded in the narratives. Friedman observes that “[g]eographic allegorization . . . is not merely a figure of speech, but a central constituent of identity” (23). To narrate space is to create meaning for the places we inhabit, occupy and around which we move. It is relevant to note, however, that space manifests itself differently in each work and is explored through many perspectives. Bechdel’s narrative favors the domestic space whereas Mootoo’s text assigns greater narrative attention to the urban space. By bringing into focus the spatial relations underlying the stories, *Fun Home* and *Valmiki’s Daughter* allow for the exploration of the relationship between literary creation and spatial categories. How these relations are articulated within the space of the home and the city emerge most prominently in the narratives.

During this investigation, home has appeared as a dominant trope in Bechdel’s narrative, as informed by its satirical title. I argued, with *Fun Home* in particular, that its form of artistic production characterizes a mode of representation that demands further attention, in

that it brings the articulation of space to the visual realm. Through the aid of pictorial techniques performed through the graphic narrative, Bechdel places the image of the home at the center of the story, achieving new meanings with this mechanism of signification. This construction of the domestic space closely evokes the figure of Alison's father. Throughout the narrative, her father, family and herself come to be indissociable from that space (see fig. 18 pp. 86).



In a metonymic allusion, the house motif is described in correspondence with the ambivalent Bruce and draws attention to the contradictory relationship the protagonist has with both.

Alison's conflict derives mostly from experiencing alienation and estrangement at her own home, provoked to a large extent by Bruce's ceaseless renewal of the Victorian mansion: "His greatest achievement, arguably, was his monomaniacal restoration of our old house" (4). I have observed that Bechdel's drawings give heightened significance to the domestic area. Image and text work alongside each other to create meaning and construct space. Desks, bookcases, rugs, tables, decorations, fixtures, house plants and so on are brought to the fore. Characters often find themselves competing with obtrusive household items that saturate Bechdel's detailed visual composition. Such an arrangement, along with the character's

interaction within it, suggests the primacy of the space of the home and its interference with its dwellers.

Home is commonly identified as the primary site of family relations. The seeming contradiction in Bechdel's narrative is that Bruce's earnest care for the home and improvement of its foundations harms the foundation of the family. "[I]t is Bruce Bechdel's obsession with the family home that distances him from familial intimacy or community," argues Lydenberg (61). A sense of home and the family unit collide under Bruce's control (see fig. 19 pp. 7).



The ceaseless restoration with which Alison's father intensively labors over points to an inconclusive, never-ending process of building that domestic space. This condition of being perpetually unfinished and under construction elicits a reading of home as unstable and has prompted a discussion on the notion of home and its cultural and social meanings.

I have addressed, in chapter 1, definitions of home and its potential for destabilization. It was argued that many critics are engaged in a theoretical discussion on the politics and poetics of home which recognize it as a "sliding category" (Almeida, *Cartografias de gênero* 110) that may sustain a variety of meanings. Frequently idealized and romanticized, home is

regarded as a safe haven and retreat, a site for longing and nostalgia. Schröder has warned us of the perils of such idealization, arguing that it “is dangerous as it poses home as unchangeable and static, an enclosed and restricted (albeit potentially protective) place that attains its attraction precisely because it is exclusive and limiting” (35). A highly charged symbol, then, home, in addition to being a physical location and structure of residence, is also a place of affection and emotional attachment, a locus of memory and identity. As Blunt and Dowling write, home is “a complex and multi-layered geographical concept . . . [it] is: a place/site, a set of feelings/cultural meanings, and the relations between the two” (2). Their critical geography seeks to show that home has both a material and imaginative dimension that influences one another.

The notion of a stable home erodes even further if we consider the queer dynamics that complicate relations within the domestic environment. Heteronormativity, as I have been discussing, rests on the belief that family values and assumed gender roles are to be held as an ideal form of social organization. Besides being a vital concern underlying Bechdel’s narrative, the home motif, to which Alison is profoundly linked, could also be observed in *Valmiki’s Daughter* particularly in relation to the queer kinship that marks the experience of its subjects. In both novels, fathers and daughters, whose identities do not adjust to norms on gender and sexuality, face home as a disputed ground, attesting that it “may just as likely be a place of oppression and violence as one of sanctuary and contentment” (Blunt and Dowling 16). Relations of domination and exclusion encoded in the domestic space push characters into dealing with shifting and ambiguous conceptions of home and into seeking queer identifying places in the pursuit of agency and different cultural systems. This is evidenced by Alison’s desire to move to New York and Viveka’s envisioning of a new life elsewhere.

Furthermore, I have also emphasized the space of the forest, which appears with high frequency in *Valmiki's Daughter*, and takes on allegorical significance as an alternative way for Valmiki and Viveka to develop a sense of place and belonging.

Gendered categorizations of home were another issue stressed in this work. Warmth, domesticity, security, protection, comfort and other words related to normative conceptualizations of home, are also symbolically linked to femininity. As Doreen Massey explains on the geographies of power embedded in understandings of home and identity: “the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, both reflect and affect the way in which gender is constructed and understood (179). By exposing how gender relations are constructed and transformed, Massey has reminded us that the domestic sphere is coded as a female space within a binary frame that attempts to remove women from the male-dominated public realms. Feminist criticism must work towards undoing these dichotomous divisions that tend to favor a masculine position and perspective.

Beyond neutrality, therefore, my argument has been that home and questions of power, gender, identity and affection are deeply interconnected. Calling for a critical reexamination of the concept of home, when approaching literary works, is to understand how that space is constructed within the narrative and consider how characters inhabiting those places experience and negotiate spatial relations within the domestic realm. My examination of *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter* has led me to believe that home, a space of comfort and confront, no longer bears fixed definitions and demands a reassessment of prevalent assumptions that sacralize the domestic sphere.

Linking the home to wider matters of power, politics and culture supports the idea that the private and public spheres are thus inseparable and reciprocally constitute one another. The boundary between home and other spaces is fluid. Households are inserted within a community that directly influences that space. Every home is, hence, tied into a broader location, city and nation that sets upon it a specific political and cultural reality. Throughout my text, I have taken a closer look at the representation of spatial relations in Bechdel's and Mootoo's narratives, outlining the construction of domestic space predominating in *Fun Home*. I then proceeded with a parallel argument for the attention granted to the image of the city in *Valmiki's Daughter*, focusing on the portrayal of that space in the novel.

Resting at the core of Mootoo's text are the spatial limits of the urban structure and the public arena. *Valmiki's Daughter* extensively explores the space of the city in the Caribbean territory and the multiplicity of social groups and backgrounds emerging out of this heterogeneous spatial distribution. The novel represents the urban space with its many components, people, services, capital and goods mapped onto its geography. Mootoo's writing, as I highlighted in earlier sections, constitutes a spatial practice encompassing the complex interplay of social relations and power systems inscribed in Trinidadian landscape.

Mootoo's literary cartography encouraged me to engage in a reflection on the nature of cities. What was made evident in our previous debate was their dynamic and plural quality. In their theorization of what characterizes urban life, Amin and Graham regard cities "as places of connection and disconnection". To them, they "are woven fully into all the social ambiguities of modern life, with their tensions between shared purposes and conflicting individualism, their contested desires and cultural demands, and their mixtures of exclusion,

inclusion, fear and trust” (34). This statement finds resonance in *Valmiki's Daughter's* construction of the urban area and the cultural mosaic created in its depiction. Mootoo's writing has shed light on issues surrounding the conflicting space of the city and its open and heterogeneous constitution. Encoded in the urban landscape outlined in the narrative is the idea of the city as a place composed of various constituents and a multiplicity of cultural traditions, a place where diverse people, stories and identities can meet, converge, cross and clash. Furthermore, my analysis of the city spaces and spatial imagery in the novel have led me to discern a pattern of representation in Mootoo's text that unfolds in two major ways. First, there are the second-person introductory narrations. Secondly, we have the sense of motion provided by the aforementioned sections.

In chapter 2, I referred to the passages in *Valmiki's Daughter* preceding the main storyline, which describe us, the readers, aimlessly navigating through town, and pointed out that these opening sections offer a portrayal of the urban scenario, focusing mainly on the social dynamics and connections composing the space in Mootoo's text. A change in the pace of the story occurs when these passages are inserted, causing a disruption on the narrative flow and rhythm, directing us towards a more spatially-oriented narration. It was noted that the chapters - named after the characters - are placed after these spatial constructions, in an allusive textual disposition. My reading was that this narrative structure in Mootoo's work suggestively contains characters, in that it locates them between descriptions of space, which made it possible to infer that these subjects are, to some degree, tied to location. I have explained, in my second chapter, that Valmiki, entrapped by notoriety, must respond to the Caribbean social order and reinforce values that act in compliance with social conventions. These textual borders delimiting the narrative serve to highlight the peripheral position

subjects occupy in the novel in regards to their desires and gender expressions, a position that sets them in continual negotiation with the margins.

A second pattern of representation I identify in *Valmiki's Daughter* refers to movement in the geographic introductions. It was argued that the descriptions of which these introductions consist encompass a variety of sceneries mapping the city, culminating in the neighborhood where the Krishnus live. The narrative voice, choosing words that indicate an ascending journey, gradually progresses upward, moving past less privileged locations in the direction of the secluded upscale area of the city, isolated from the bustling flow of the urban center. Implied in this rising motion, I remarked, is the hierarchical organization and stratifications that operate on society. Urban living is characterized by tension. Money, power, luxury, poverty and pollution are juxtaposed in the space of the city, forming a heterogeneous network that engenders both diversity and friction. Urban tensions appeared evident in Mootoo's text as two poles stand in opposition on the configurations of power. Spatial construction then became a useful framework from assessing how segments of society are structured and distributed along unequal lines of social relations.

Most importantly, I talk about the symbolic significance of the movement motif. *Valmiki's Daughter* style interweaves narrative perspectives in its textual construction and divides the story into two different strands, one that turns its gaze to geographical space and the other that is concerned with the characters, as I outlined earlier. This is noteworthy because the subjects in the novel are frequently divided between moving and remaining, staying in place or going away, confinement and freedom, ceaseless motion or passivity. To express this indeterminacy, instability is hence built into the text.

A dialectical relation between fixity and mobility underlying the narrative structure is

also read as evidence that mobility is a main urban issue in both literary works, particularly in relation to chances of transgressing sexual and gender norms. Seeking to migrate elsewhere, I observe, stands as a central concern in *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter*. Valmiki, Viveka and Anick face the ongoing struggle with the idea of pursuing better opportunities and more favorable conditions to challenge systemic and institutionalized heteronormative ideologies. Bechdel's text likewise draws on this debate, presenting the issue of escaping to another place as a key moment in Alison's construction of identity.

Chapter 3 develops two contrasting examples of what I choose to entitle "a glimpse." I use it to convey the act by which the protagonists of both novels first catch a glance at alternative forms of gender expression outside heterosexist borders. A parallel is traced between the two scenes, as each represents a potential foreshadowing of what life might be for the two girls should they decide to follow a path that rejects societal demands on gender and sexuality. Resonating deeply within them, the images are their first conscious contact with sexually transgressive subjects, although they each imply opposite meanings. Alison spots a woman with masculine-associated attributes at a roadside restaurant, followed by a trip to NY in which she comes across the burgeoning queer scene. These episodes prove an alluring sight for her, an announcing of future prospects. On the other hand, there is Merle Bedi's decaying figure in *Valmiki's Daughter*, an appearance that provides an ominous warning on the repercussion of crossing boundaries. The illustrations work to sustain my argument that, although the glimpse refers to the same gesture, it signifies both possibility and impossibility for each girl.

Addressed in prior chapters, the image of Merle Bedi acts as link between the space of the home, the city and questions of gender. Her life is thrown into upheaval after her lesbian

identity is exposed. Bedi faces severe stigmatization and is unwillingly forced into homelessness. Occupying public spaces as a home removes Merle's right to citizenship, leading her sense of subjectivity and personhood to be seized from her. The representation of this body as abject, relegated to the margins, brought to light how the condition of abjection expresses how normative systems require subjects to maintain boundaries of coherence, without which social order is destabilized. Despite her brief apparition, Bedi's ever-haunting presence resonates throughout the narrative and torments Viveka. What this sight provokes is a memory that sustains her prolonged fear of being structurally marginalized and subjected to violence. As I note, therefore, that Merle Bedi enters the narrative with the function of raising questions about dominant discourses on gender and sexuality.

Moreover, Bedi is used as grounds for thinking about the spatialization of gender issues. Public spaces, political systems, agency and sexuality are intricately related, especially if we bear in mind that the persecution and ostracism faced by queer subjects is sustained by the law in a large number of places, including the Caribbean. My argument is that *Fun Home's* depiction of New York City has contributed to an inquiry on queer spatiality. The major political shifts NY undergoes during the period of the Stonewall riots, I point out, give rise to new ideologies and social paradigms that contest heteronormative hegemonic structures, enabling a larger potential for agency and political action. Queer spaces are then defined by acts of resistance and bonding, places in which social collectivities meet to modify and appropriate space with the aim of granting minority groups social and cultural legibility. Merle Bedi, however, being located in a country where sexually transgressive practices are criminalized by law, is not guaranteed legal protection and is severely punished for her deviation from the norm.

Space and place, I claim, perform a decisive role in affecting how individuals construct sexual identities and articulate their desires. This is why a geography of positionality becomes relevant to this investigation. I am reminded by Susan Friedman that space “often functions as trope for cultural location—for identity and knowledge as locationally as well as historically produced. Setting works as symbolic geography, signaling or marking the specific cultural location of a character within the larger society” (137). Space, as one of the constitutive elements of identity, carries material effects in each individual. A relational framework shows that different social structures and conditions produce distinct sets of cultural formations and practices. The characters in *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter* are thus shaped by location as an axis of difference that impacts on individual freedoms and gender expressions.

Gender is another major issue that has run throughout this work. My work has demonstrated that space, identity and gender are profoundly interwoven. I have acknowledged the importance of queer and feminist criticism as crucial to the theoretical debate proposed here. As a structure of relations, a cultural system of signification and an analytical category, gender lies at the center of the narratives examined. Chapter 3 explores *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter* from a gender perspective, focusing also on their intersections with concepts like identity, space, desire, patriarchy, the family and the body.

My critique is articulated primarily in accordance with queer theory's epistemological concerns on the politics of difference, identity paradigms and cultural practices. The third chapter shows how queer and gender studies seek to disrupt normative discourses, question the prevailing modes of thought on sexuality, and investigate the cultural mechanisms that operate on gendered subjectivities, and help assess how these topics are connected to the

literary works about which I research.

Among the authors that supported the conceptual frame for my approach, Judith Butler is a main critical source to develop the groundwork on gender discourses. Butler's analysis elaborates on the dichotomous rationality that guides the gender-sex/feminine-masculine oppositional pairs. Reiterating that heterosexuality is a regulatory institution, the critic writes that "the very notion of the subject, intelligible only through its appearance as gendered, admits of possibilities that have been forcibly foreclosed by the various reifications of gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies" (44). Butler affirms that gender categories depend on a diametrically opposed rigid differentiation. Her remark is significant because it unveils the ideology at work behind these compulsory practices that try to pose sex and gender as naturally given entities. Such hypothesis highlights the relevance of rethinking sexual difference in non-hierarchical terms in an effort to undo gender asymmetries.

Additionally, Butler's notion on gender performativity critically questions constructs on sexuality that make any claims to authenticity. To conceive gender and sex as univocal, coherent and homogeneous wholes constitutes a fiction that has by no means basis on the natural. Pleasure and desire, within a heterosexual hegemonic mode, "serve the legitimating practices of identity formation that take place within the matrix of gender norms" (90). Butler's theorizations on gender points to the artificiality of the concept as a discursively constituted, fabricated construction destined to parodic repetition in order to perpetuate itself as original.

In light of Judith Butler's notions, I aimed my examination at the gender relations articulated in the novels. Binary constructions of gender difference are a major thematic linkage between Bechdel's and Mootoo's narratives. One important aspect that comes up in

my work is Alison and Viveka's expression of gender outside ideal expectations of femininity. It has been mentioned that the girls are repeatedly submitted to dominant cultural codes on identity that rely on essentialist conceptions of feminine attributes. Alison and Viveka distance themselves from traits associated with femininity within cultural stereotypes, performing their identities in line with masculine gender assumptions, such as wearing short hair, avoiding dresses, skirts and other adornments and playing sports. As Alison observes: "I counted as an indication of my success the nickname [Butch] bestowed on me by my older cousins" (96). Both Alison and Viveka must endure continuous attempts to have their bodies inscribed with socially regulated set of attributes that follow a relation of continuity in regards to their gender. Butler points to "the construction of the category of women as a coherent and stable subject an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations" (9). Encoded in a system of power relations produced by normative discourses, a body is read according to culturally instituted assumptions. By rejecting elements commonly identified as feminine, these subjects refuse to conform to pre-established gender signifiers and endeavor to overcome traditional roles assigned to each gender.

Discussing the daughters and the social production of masculinity and femininity leads to a reflection on the father figures in the *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter*. In chapter 3, I establish the daughters in counterpoint to their fathers in terms of how their sexual and gender identities are constructed. Bruce and Valmiki not only impose heterosexual constructs upon their daughters but also embrace those normative identitarian paradigms for themselves, in addition to espousing traditional family models in a firmly entrenched patriarchal framework. As queer subjects, however, these characters simultaneously disrupt and reinforce the heterosexist norm, presenting a relation of duplicity towards these power

mechanisms.

It has been suggested that Bruce's incessant renovation of his home is both a literal and symbolic endeavor to keep up a façade, a way of maintaining a false front to cover any faults lurking beneath its surface. Alison comments about her father: "He would perform, as Daedalus did, dazzling displays of artfulness" (9). Seeing Bruce and his house as closely intertwined has been to look at the process of constructing that space in close association with the process of constructing his own identity. To Valmiki, images of masculinity are primarily related to a social position. In an exercise of self-parody, Valmiki displays exaggerated markers of male virility, linking masculinity with ill-conceived notions of aggressiveness and overt allusions to sexuality, thus making its constructed character explicit. His performativity serves to achieve the strategic goal of asserting his power in the phallogentric system of conservative Trinidadian upper-class society. Both fathers incorporate authoritative discourses and sustain conventions reproduced by a deeply embedded patriarchal culture. It is through meeting the demands of dominant societal values that they are able to secure their position and status within their households and family relations. As I argue in the third chapter, same-sex desire and male-privilege are not mutually exclusive axis of subjectivity.

If identity is relationally constituted within systems of cultural and sexual significations, the fathers are influenced by "various combinations of difference that may or may not be tied to oppression" (Friedman 21). Occupying contradictory subject positions, Bruce and Valmiki are located at the crossroads of dominant structures of power, standing both outside and within discourses that mediate masculinity. This ambivalence is highlighted in Friedman's theory of positionality, that views "identity as the site of multiple subject positions, as the intersection of different and often competing cultural formations" (21).

Friedman's proposal resonates in the many queer subjectivities found in *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter*, each of them interacting differently with other categories of alterity. What is outlined in chapter 3, then, are the paradoxes emerging from exploring queer families within heterosexist boundaries, in a complex interplay of gender, sexuality, desire, identity and space.

Throughout this work, the presence of space in literature has functioned as a mediator to trace the connections between the novels. These stories have shown how sexual and gender identities can be spatially constructed. Robert Tally Jr. regards narratives as "spatially symbolic acts" in that they map out space by representing it in an allegorical way. Creating spaces in fiction is to construct places, locations, boundaries, limits, positions, terrains of possibilities. Writing is then a spatial practice that creates, represents, formulates and reformulates spaces.

In *Fun Home* and *Valmiki's Daughter*, systems of social and cultural relations are brought to the realm of the spatial. One of my main objectives has been to consider how the space of home and the city are shaped through textual and visual meanings. These narratives have demonstrated the ways in which subjects make sense of place and interact with their surroundings, relating to my claim that private and public spheres, power configurations, political settings, gender relations and the construction of identity closely intersect.

The act of building narratives means not only to produce a discourse on space, but to enable possibilities of its subversion. To quote Friedman, "Cultural narratives encode and encrypt in story form the norms, values, and ideologies of the social order" (9), but they are also a place for those notions to be contested. In conclusion, I would like to highlight the significance of literature, in our case, and other narrative forms such as movies, plays, poetry,

artworks, and so on as cultural practices that produce spatialities outside the dominant order. If we consider “literature as a space of representation and cultural productions”¹⁹ (my trans.; Almeida, “O Poder da Escrita” 299), narratives, like those presented by Bechdel and Mootoo, become a site for constructing and articulating identities and desires and literary creation is, then, a powerful epistemological instrument to promote intervention and counter-hegemonic significations. Through cultural texts, non-normative subjects, who had been long subjected to cultural effacement from signifying systems can, therefore, be rendered visible and intelligible, as I discuss in *Fun Home* and *Valmiki’s Daughter*.

¹⁹ “literatura como espaço de representações e produções culturais.”

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