Not-Quite Women: Gender Stereotypes, Class, and Narrative Authority in Kamila Shamsie's Salt and Saffron

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Abstract

Kamila Shamsie's second novel, Salt and Saffron (2000), tells the story of Aliya Dard-e-Dil, a young woman from an aristocratic Karachi family who returns home from graduate study in America to confront the secrets embedded in her family's obsessive storytelling tradition, above all the scandal of her aunt Mariam's silent elopement with the family cook. This essay argues that gender stereotype in Shamsie's novel functions not as a stable set of beliefs about women's nature but as a mechanism for policing class boundaries, applied selectively and hypocritically according to a woman's proximity to family power. Reading the novel's central "fallen woman" figure, Mariam Apa, alongside its narrator's own parallel romance with the "unsuitable" Khaleel, this essay traces how Shamsie's novel first exposes and then actively revises inherited gender stereotype through its narrator's reclamation of storytelling itself as a form of authority historically denied to women like Mariam. The essay situates this argument within feminist criticism of South Asian family fiction and the honour economy, within feminist narratology's attention to gendered narrative authority, and within a brief comparison to Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things, before concluding that Salt and Saffron ultimately stages narrative control, rather than romantic success alone, as the precondition for a woman's escape from inherited stereotype.

Keywords: gender stereotype, Kamila Shamsie, Salt and Saffron, class, honour, South Asian women's fiction, narrative authority

Introduction

The Dard-e-Dils, the aristocratic Karachi family at the centre of Kamila Shamsie's Salt and Saffron, live, in the narrator's own account, in permanent apprehension of the "not-quite-twin": a family curse traced back to three brothers born within hours of one another, some just before midnight and some just after, so that history recorded them as separated by a full calendar day rather than united as the simultaneous triplets they otherwise were. This single genealogical technicality becomes, across generations of Dard-e-Dil storytelling, the family's explanation for every subsequent rupture, rivalry, and scandal, and it is this inherited explanatory habit that the novel's narrator, Aliya Dard-e-Dil, both depends on and gradually learns to interrogate. A graduate student in education returning to Karachi after four years in the United States, Aliya considers herself, by her own account, an accomplished family storyteller, possessed of a "gallery" of anecdotes about relatives she barely knows; the novel is largely the record of what happens when one of those anecdotes — the disappearance of her silent aunt, Mariam Apa, with the family cook, Masood — turns out to require a far more honest telling than the family has ever permitted it.

Shamsie's novel proceeds along two interwoven timelines. In the historical strand, Mariam Apa arrives at the Dard-e-Dil household on the day of Aliya's birth, claiming descent from Taimur, one of the three "not-quite" triplets long believed lost to the family; she offers no proof beyond a shared family trait, a distinctive clavicle, and is nonetheless folded into the family, where she speaks to no one but Masood, dictating each day's menu to him and, in the process, elevating his cooking into something the narrator repeatedly describes in reverent, sensory detail. Four years before the novel's present action, Mariam vanishes with Masood, an event the family can only process as scandal and curse

rather than as an intelligible act of love, and which leaves Aliya estranged from her formidable grandmother, Dadi. In the present-day strand, Aliya, flying home via London, meets and is drawn to Khaleel, a Pakistani-American whose family, she soon learns, comes from Liaquatabad, a working-class Karachi neighbourhood that renders him, by her own social circle's unstated rules, an entirely unsuitable match.

This essay argues that Salt and Saffron uses the parallel structure of these two romances — Mariam and Masood in the past, Aliya and Khaleel in the present — to expose gender stereotype as inseparable from class anxiety, and to stage the narrator's own eventual refusal of that inheritance as an act made possible specifically by her control over the telling of the story. This argument matters beyond the specifics of a single novel because it offers a way of reading a recurring pattern in elite family fiction more broadly: the tendency to explain a woman's transgressive desire through the vocabulary of fate, curse, or moral failing precisely in those cases where the plainer explanation — that she wanted someone her family considered beneath her — would require the family to examine its own class prejudice rather than her supposed defect of character. The discussion that follows first situates the novel's treatment of gender within the specific critical context of South Asian family fiction and honour, then considers how the novel's narrative form itself distributes gendered authority, before turning to close readings first of Mariam Apa's story and then of Aliya and Khaleel's, and finally placing Shamsie's novel briefly alongside Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things as part of a broader literary conversation about class-crossing desire and its costs.

Theorizing Gender Stereotype in South Asian Elite Family Fiction

Gender stereotype, understood as a critical term rather than a colloquial complaint, names the culturally scripted, binary set of roles into which women's behaviour is habitually sorted regardless of individual circumstance: the good, chaste, silent, marriageable daughter on one side, and the desiring, transgressive, "fallen" woman on the other, with very little narrative space permitted between the two. Feminist literary criticism has long observed that these binaries do not describe women's actual moral variety so much as manage it, offering a family or a community a ready-made vocabulary for absorbing any given woman's conduct into one of two pre-existing categories, thereby foreclosing the more difficult work of asking what she herself wanted and why.

In South Asian family fiction specifically, this stereotype binary is inseparable from the economy of izzat, or honour, in which a family's collective social standing is understood to rest disproportionately on the sexual and marital conduct of its women. Because a family's honour is imagined as something that can be preserved only by female chastity and lost through female transgression, women within this economy occupy a peculiarly exposed position: they are simultaneously the designated custodians of the family's reputation and its most vulnerable potential source of ruin, watched, discussed, and judged in ways the family's men, whose own conduct rarely receives comparable scrutiny, are not. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's influential account of the "real and imagined" woman in postcolonial South Asian discourse has traced how the family's own self-image comes to depend on maintaining certain women as symbols of purity and continuity, so that any woman whose actual desires or actions depart from that symbolic function is not simply disapproved of but must be actively reinterpreted, explained away, or erased from the family's preferred narrative of itself.

Salt and Saffron dramatizes this dynamic with unusual clarity, but it also insists on a further complication that this essay takes as central: the novel's gender stereotype cannot be separated from a class stereotype operating alongside and through it. Mariam Apa's transgression is not simply that she desired a man outside a sanctioned courtship; it is that she desired, and successfully partnered with, the family's own cook — a man positioned at the very bottom of the household's internal hierarchy of employment and status. The scandal that follows is calibrated exactly to this class distance: had Mariam eloped with a socially suitable, merely unapproved suitor from within her own class, the family's vocabulary of shame would likely have been milder, more quickly forgiven, perhaps eventually absorbed into the family's fund of romantic anecdotes rather than into its fund of curses. That her partner was a servant is what converts an ordinary transgression of parental authority into an unspeakable rupture requiring the invention of a supernatural curse to explain it. Gender stereotype, in other words, is in this novel less a belief about what women

are inherently like than a proxy vocabulary the family reaches for whenever its class boundaries are threatened by a woman's actual desire, and this essay's subsequent sections trace that proxy relationship in detail.

It is worth noting, further, that the novel's honour economy operates with a double standard the Dard-e-Dils themselves never explicitly acknowledge but which the narrative makes visible through simple asymmetry of consequence. The family's men, including its "not-quite-twin" triplets whose own romantic and marital histories are treated by family lore as the origin of the entire curse, are remembered by the novel's inherited storytelling as tragic, romantic, even glamorous figures, their transgressions absorbed into the family's mythology as evidence of the Dard-e-Dil temperament rather than as sources of ongoing shame requiring active suppression. Mariam, whose transgression is arguably no greater in kind, receives no equivalent romantic gloss; she receives silence, exile, and a curse-narrative that forecloses rather than romanticizes her story. This asymmetry is precisely what a critical account of gender stereotype should expect: because honour in this economy is vested overwhelmingly in female conduct, a man's transgression can be absorbed into the family myth as colourful history, while a woman's equivalent transgression must be neutralized, through myth or moral judgment, before it destabilizes the family's self-image any further.

This dynamic takes on a further specificity in the particular milieu Shamsie depicts: a Karachi elite whose sense of its own distinction rests not on contemporary wealth alone but on a genealogical claim to aristocratic, pre-Partition lineage, remembered through inherited titles, family trees, and physical markers such as the Dard-e-Dil clavicle. For a family whose entire social identity depends on this claim of inherited, blood-based distinction, a woman's marriage or partnership functions as more than a personal alliance; it functions as a genealogical event that either confirms or threatens the family's continued claim to distinction across the generation that follows. A servant's blood entering the family line, however informally, through Mariam's relationship with Masood threatens this genealogical self-conception in a way that a merely unapproved match within the same social tier would not, which is part of why the novel insists that gender stereotype here cannot be adequately explained without reference to this specific, class-genealogical anxiety rather than a more generic account of patriarchal control over female sexuality alone.

Narrative Form: Storytelling as Gendered Power

Salt and Saffron is, at the level of its basic premise, a novel about who gets to tell a family's story and whose version of events is permitted to stand as authoritative. Aliya's opening self-description as a practiced, even compulsive family storyteller signals immediately that narrative control is not incidental to the novel's concerns but constitutes one of its central subjects: this is a narrator who is explicitly aware of herself as a teller of tales, who has inherited a "gallery" of family anecdotes, and who nonetheless discovers, in the course of the novel, that the story she has been telling about Mariam Apa — cursed, silent, inexplicable — was never her own version of events at all, but the version the family had settled on collectively in order to avoid confronting what Mariam's silence and eventual elopement actually meant.

This structure allows Shamsie to stage a specifically gendered contest over narrative authority. Dadi, the family matriarch, functions throughout much of the novel as the primary guardian of the family's official story, the figure whose account of the "not-quite-twins" curse and of Mariam's disappearance the rest of the family has largely deferred to; it is Aliya's break with this deferral — her refusal to accept Dadi's version without further investigation — that drives the novel's present-day plot and eventually forces the more complicated truth of Mariam and Masood's story into the open. That both the guardian of the official story and the narrator who eventually challenges it are women is significant: the novel does not stage narrative authority as a simple matter of men silencing women, but rather shows how women themselves can become invested, out of loyalty to family reputation, in maintaining exactly the stereotypes that erase other women's agency. Aliya's eventual retelling of Mariam's story is thus a feminist act not because it opposes patriarchal men but because it opposes an inherited, family-wide narrative consensus — one enforced as much through female as through male authority — that had converted Mariam from a woman who made a considered, if scandalous, choice into a passive victim of cosmic misfortune.

The novel's dual timeline structure reinforces this argument formally. By interleaving Aliya's present-day pursuit of Khaleel with her gradual excavation of Mariam and Masood's history, Shamsie ensures that the reader experiences Aliya's own developing self-awareness about class prejudice at the same pace as her discoveries about her aunt, so that the novel's narrative form itself performs the connection its plot will eventually state outright: that understanding Mariam's story correctly, on Mariam's own terms rather than the family's, is the precondition for Aliya being able to make a different choice regarding Khaleel than the family's stereotype would otherwise dictate for her.

Aliya's specific vantage point as a narrator, moreover, is not incidental to her capacity to challenge the family's inherited account. She narrates from a position partially outside the household's daily surveillance, having spent four years as a graduate student in the United States before the novel's present action begins; this geographic and institutional distance grants her a degree of interpretive latitude that a woman narrating entirely from within the household's daily supervision might not as easily claim. The novel is careful, however, not to present this distance as a simple, uncomplicated liberation: Aliya's American years have not made her free of the family's class prejudice, as her own initial hesitation about Khaleel's background demonstrates, but they have given her the narrative habit of stepping back from a story in order to examine its shape, a habit she then turns, productively, on her own family's account of Mariam. Narrative authority in this novel is thus presented as partly a matter of literal distance and partly a matter of acquired critical habit, both of which Aliya possesses and neither of which Mariam, confined within the household's daily watchfulness for the whole of her residence there, was ever permitted to develop for herself.

Mariam Apa and the "Fallen Woman" Stereotype

The family's account of Mariam Apa, prior to Aliya's investigation, relies on two superficially opposed but functionally identical explanatory strategies, both of which serve to avoid acknowledging her as a woman with legible desires and agency. The first is supernatural: Mariam's fate is folded into the "not-quite-twins" curse, treated as another instance of the Dard-e-Dil family's fated misfortune rather than as the outcome of any decision a particular woman actually made. The second is moral: beneath the language of curse and fate lies a quieter, more conventional judgment that Mariam was simply a "fallen" woman, her elopement evidence of some inherent defect or weakness rather than of a reasoned, if costly, choice. What unites these two explanations, despite their apparent difference — one cosmic, one moral — is that both relieve the family of the more uncomfortable task of admitting that Mariam wanted something, chose it deliberately, and was willing to pay an extraordinary social price for it. Curse and moral failing alike displace the question of Mariam's agency onto forces external to her own will: the stars, in one telling; a flaw in her character, in the other.

Mariam's initial acceptance into the family deserves attention alongside her later exile, because the two moments together frame the essay's central claim about stereotype as class policing rather than fixed belief. She arrives with no proof of her claimed lineage beyond a shared clavicle, a physical trait the family treats as sufficient evidence of authentic Dard-e-Dil identity, and this acceptance is granted readily, even warmly, at the moment she is understood to be one of them by blood. The family's warmth toward Mariam prior to her elopement demonstrates that the household's stereotype of appropriate femininity is not applied uniformly to all silent, unusual, or socially awkward women; it is applied punitively only once a given woman's conduct threatens to cross the specific boundary the family is most anxious to protect, namely the line separating the Dard-e-Dils from those who serve them. The same silence that reads, before the elopement, as endearing eccentricity is retroactively reread, after the elopement, as evidence of a deeper strangeness or curse-marked fate — not because Mariam's silence itself changed in character, but because the meaning the family was willing to assign to it changed entirely once her desire crossed a class line rather than remaining safely contained within one.

Mariam's chosen silence throughout her years in the household deserves particular attention as a further complication of the stereotype the family builds around her. She speaks, by every account the novel offers, to no one except Masood, and even that speech is confined largely to the practical business of dictating each day's menu. A family inclined to read women's behaviour through a narrow stereotypical grid has an obvious explanation ready for such silence — withdrawal, perhaps trauma, perhaps simple oddness — and the novel shows the family reaching for

exactly these explanations without ever seriously entertaining the possibility that Mariam's silence might be a chosen and effective strategy rather than a symptom. Read against the family's own noisy, competitive culture of storytelling, in which every relative seems eager to supply and embellish an account of every other relative's business, Mariam's silence functions as a genuine refusal to participate in a system that would only ever convert her words into fodder for exactly the kind of curse-narrative the family later constructs around her anyway. That her one channel of expression is directed toward Masood, and takes the practical, daily form of menu and meal rather than declared romantic sentiment, allows her desire to develop and to be enacted for years within the household's own walls without the family's surveillance ever correctly identifying what it was witnessing.

The eventual revelation of Mariam and Masood's elopement, four years before the novel's present action, retroactively exposes both of the family's prior explanatory strategies as insufficient. Once Aliya, over the course of her investigation, comes to understand the relationship not as an inexplicable rupture but as the culmination of years of quiet, consistent choice — food prepared to Mariam's exact specification, evenings of silence directed toward one particular listener, a devotion sustained without any of the courtship rituals the family would have recognized and could therefore have intervened against — the "curse" explanation collapses into something closer to its opposite: not fate acting on Mariam, but Mariam acting, patiently and deliberately, within the very limited space of agency the household's rigid class hierarchy allowed her. The novel's late revelations about the couple's subsequent life recontextualize the family's stereotype further, converting what had been treated purely as scandal and loss into something the narrator herself, by the novel's end, is willing to describe with considerably more sympathy and considerably less shame than her relatives ever permitted themselves.

Food and cooking, threaded throughout the novel as a governing motif, carry much of this argument's symbolic weight. Masood's transformation, under Mariam's daily direction, from a merely competent cook into a maker of what the narrator repeatedly describes in richly sensory terms, stages the household's most basic sustaining labour as itself a site of intimacy and collaboration between a highborn woman and a servant, collapsing, at the level of the kitchen, exactly the class distance the family insists on preserving everywhere else. The novel's own title, yoking the ordinary, foundational seasoning of salt to the rare, prized luxury of saffron, encodes this argument directly: Masood, structurally coded throughout as salt — necessary, unglamorous, taken for granted — is revealed, once Mariam's attention and the narrative's own closer attention are both properly directed at him, to be as essential to the family's most treasured sensory pleasures as any of its more celebrated, aristocratic ingredients. That the novel later has Khaleel bring dishes associated with Masood's cooking back into Aliya's present-day life is a further and more hopeful iteration of the same symbolism, suggesting that what the family once tried to bury as scandal can, a generation later, be reclaimed as inheritance rather than shame.

Aliya, Khaleel, and the Repetition and Revision of Stereotype

Aliya's own romance with Khaleel is constructed by the novel as a structural echo of Mariam and Masood's story precisely so that the reader is invited to ask whether the family's history will simply repeat itself. Khaleel, like Masood, is coded as class-unsuitable: his family's roots lie in Liaquatabad, a working-class Karachi neighbourhood, a fact that Aliya's own social circle registers immediately and dismissively, treating his origins as sufficient grounds to rule him out as a serious romantic prospect regardless of his personal qualities. The revelation that Aliya and Mariam are themselves linked as the new generation's "not-quite twins" — sharing, in the family's own superstitious logic, a fated connection across generations — makes this echo explicit within the novel's own terms: Aliya is invited by her family's inherited belief system to read her attraction to Khaleel as confirmation that she, too, is fated to repeat her aunt's scandal and her aunt's cost.

What distinguishes Aliya's trajectory from Mariam's, this essay argues, is not that her transgression is somehow smaller or safer, but that she alone among the novel's women possesses narrative control over how her own story will be told. Mariam's story was, for years, told about her, by a family invested in converting her silence and her choice into curse and shame; Aliya's story, by contrast, is being told by Aliya herself, in her own voice, as the novel's narrator, which means she retains the capacity Mariam never had to name her own desire honestly, to interrogate

her own inherited class prejudice explicitly, and to refuse the shame her family's vocabulary would otherwise assign to her. The novel's present-action question, as its own contemporary reviewers noted at the time of publication, is precisely whether Aliya can transcend the class distinctions that doomed her aunt's relationship to secrecy and eventual exile; that she can do so at all is presented by the novel as directly dependent on her having first done the narrative work of understanding, rather than simply repeating, her family's inherited stereotype of the "unsuitable" match.

The women who surround Aliya supply a spectrum of positions on this inherited stereotype rather than a uniform wall of patriarchal disapproval, and this variation matters for the essay's larger argument about gender stereotype as class policing rather than fixed belief. Dadi, as the guardian of the family's official narrative, represents the stereotype's most entrenched defender, but even her disapproval, once its roots in the specific trauma of Mariam's disappearance are properly understood by Aliya, becomes legible as a defensive response to a real and devastating loss rather than as simple, unmotivated prejudice. Aliya's cousin Samia, whose dismissive remarks about Khaleel's neighbourhood crystallize the family's class snobbery in its most casual and unreflective form, demonstrates how thoroughly this stereotype has been internalized even by younger women who might otherwise be expected to identify with Aliya's romantic predicament rather than police it. That the novel distributes complicity with, and resistance to, the inherited stereotype across an entire spectrum of female relatives, rather than locating it exclusively in a single tyrannical matriarch or a single villainous patriarchal figure, is itself part of Shamsie's argument: gender stereotype in this family functions as a self-reproducing social structure, sustained collectively by those who benefit from its appearance of order, rather than as the isolated prejudice of any one household tyrant who might simply be defeated or outlived.

It is worth adding that Khaleel himself is not reducible, within the novel's own treatment of him, to a simple structural echo of Masood or a passive object of Aliya's evolving class consciousness. He is given his own history, his own family's migration from Karachi to the West, and his own evident awareness of exactly how his background is likely to be received by a woman of Aliya's social position, an awareness that shapes his own cautious, sometimes defensive approach to courting her. This detail matters because it prevents the novel's second romance from reading as a purely didactic device, a test case constructed solely to illustrate Aliya's moral progress; Khaleel's own guardedness suggests that he, too, has learned to anticipate the class stereotype Aliya must unlearn, and that his willingness to persist in pursuing her despite that anticipated rejection constitutes its own quieter form of courage, run in parallel to, rather than simply subordinate to, Aliya's better-narrated arc of self-examination.

Comparative Note: Shamsie and the Wider Field of South Asian Women's Fiction

Salt and Saffron's central pairing of gender stereotype and class transgression finds its most obvious and well-documented literary counterpart in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things, published three years earlier and set across the subcontinental border in Kerala. Roy's novel stages an even more devastating version of the same essential configuration: Ammu, a divorced woman returned to her family home, falls in love with Velutha, a Dalit carpenter, and the caste transgression this represents is met not with the comparatively survivable exile the Dard-e-Dils impose on Mariam but with violence, death, and the destruction of an entire family's capacity for ordinary happiness. Read alongside Roy's novel, Shamsie's treatment of the "fallen woman" and class-crossing desire looks comparatively, though not straightforwardly, more hopeful: where Roy's narrative structure withholds any possibility of narrative rehabilitation for Ammu, denying her even Aliya's belated capacity to tell her own story with sympathy, Shamsie's novel permits its second generation, Aliya, to learn from and partially redeem the first generation's tragedy rather than simply repeating its full weight of punishment.

The difference between the two novels' outcomes should not, however, be read simply as a difference in the two authors' optimism, since both novels are equally clear-eyed about the mechanisms of class policing they depict; the difference lies rather in each novel's choice of narrative structure and narrating consciousness. Roy's narrative voice belongs to Ammu's twin children, Rahel and Estha, whose own fractured, non-linear narration circles the central catastrophe without ever granting Ammu herself the sustained first-person authority that Shamsie grants Aliya; the

effect is a narrative that can mourn Ammu and indict the society that destroyed her, but cannot, within its own chosen form, retroactively supply her with the kind of narrative self-possession Aliya exercises over her own story. Shamsie's decision to make her novel's narrator the very woman contemplating the class-crossing romance, rather than a later generation merely mourning an earlier one's, is what allows Salt and Saffron to hold open the possibility Roy's structure forecloses: that a woman who narrates her own desire, in her own voice, in real time, might yet negotiate a different outcome than a woman whose desire is only ever narrated posthumously, by others, after its catastrophic end.

The comparison suggests that Salt and Saffron belongs to a broader contemporary conversation in South Asian anglophone women's fiction about whether, and under what narrative conditions, a class-crossing desire punished in one generation might be differently received, or at least differently told, in the next — a question Shamsie's own novel answers, cautiously, in the affirmative, precisely because it gives its narrator the authority Roy's narrative structure withholds from its own silenced woman.

Conclusion

Salt and Saffron uses the parallel structure of its two central romances to demonstrate that gender stereotype in the Dard-e-Dil household has never simply been a set of beliefs about women's proper nature, but has always functioned as a mechanism for policing the family's class boundaries, deployed hypocritically and unevenly depending on how directly a given woman's desire threatens the household's social hierarchy. Mariam Apa, silenced first by the family's surveillance and then by its retrospective mythology of curse and shame, stands as the novel's clearest casualty of this mechanism; Aliya, narrating her own parallel romance with Khaleel in her own voice, stands as the novel's demonstration that the mechanism can be at least partially disarmed once a woman gains sufficient narrative control to name and refuse the stereotype rather than simply enduring it.

The novel's recurring motif of food, culminating in Khaleel's gesture of returning Masoodian cooking to Aliya's present-day table, proposes that what one generation buries as scandal can become, in the next, a source of reclaimed inheritance rather than continued shame. This is a modest claim, and the essay has tried not to overstate it: Shamsie's novel does not suggest that class prejudice within families like the Dard-e-Dils simply dissolves once a sufficiently self-aware narrator arrives to examine it, nor does it pretend that Aliya's eventual acceptance of Khaleel erases the real cost Mariam paid for a materially similar choice a generation earlier. What the novel does suggest, more carefully, is that the stereotype's grip depends in part on nobody within the family ever narrating its operations honestly and aloud, and that a woman positioned to do exactly that — by education, by distance, by her own inherited gift for storytelling turned finally toward truth rather than only entertainment — can weaken, if not wholly dismantle, an inherited mechanism that once cost her aunt everything.

What Salt and Saffron ultimately suggests, for readers of postcolonial and South Asian women's fiction more broadly, is that the undoing of inherited gender stereotype in elite family narratives depends less on the disappearance of class anxiety itself, which the novel never claims will simply vanish, than on a woman's acquisition of the authority to tell her own story on her own terms, in her own timeline, before the family's preferred version has had the chance to harden into curse or cliché. Future work might extend this reading to Shamsie's later fiction — Kartography's own return to Karachi and class, or Home Fire's far more explicitly political reworking of family loyalty and transgression — to trace how this early novel's cautious optimism about narrative authority develops across a career increasingly concerned with the costs, rather than only the possibilities, of a woman's public voice.

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