town. Neither my brand of motherhood nor my sexual identity were ever presented as options to me. When I read Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality," a space opened up for me to speak as a lesbian/bisexual woman. Suddenly there were other lesbian/bisexual feminists around, women who welcomed me, supported me, maybe even loved me. I'm still looking for others like me who are "out" as successful, young, single mothers—women who haven't given up their hopes or plans after the teenage birth of their first child. Women—myself included—are often firmly convinced there is only one position open to them and can therefore strive only to fill that position.

The possibility of loving women as well as men (when it finally occurred to me) was so clear, so normal that I felt foolish for not having thought of it before. I became angry with the society that hadn't given me the option—my right—to be a lesbian/bisexual woman. In the same way, the guidance counselor hadn't given me the option—again, my right—to be successful in my own right, by my own terms, in whatever capacity I felt drawn to. Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Susie Bright and other "out" lesbian/feminist activists have opened spaces for women to create their own sensual and sexual choices. It might have been much easier for me to achieve what I have if someone had offered me the freedom to plan my future and set my own goals as a young mother. And I might have struggled less to find out who I was if my guidance counselor hadn't told me who I was to begin with.

I am doing things with my life I didn't know were possible. I'm a student. Teacher. Writer. I ride horses and bake banana bread. I read *Ms.* and listen to Nine Inch Nails and the Violent Femmes. I'm a twentysomething, thirteenth-generation "slacker" with an attitude. I am a young mother with alternative body piercings that attract questions in the mall.

I'm just the type.

Tight Jeans and Chania Chorris

Sonia Shah

I had already been away at college for a few years when my little sister unleashed her budding sexuality onto my unsuspecting suburban Indian family. When I came home to Connecticut from Oberlin on breaks, I would find her furtively posing for the mirror. At dinner, she sat opposite the window, and her eyes darted from the conversation to her reflection, trying to catch a "candid" glimpse of herself. She wore tight, tight stirrup pants and off-the-shoulder blouses and dark lipstick. In the beginning, my parents and I were merely chagrined.

I had just gathered enough resolve, egged on by my feminist boyfriend of the time, to stop shaving my legs and armpits. It felt good, but in a shaky kind of way, like if anyone asked me why I did it I might just get enraged and teary and not be able to explain. That was usually how I got when I tried to explain my new "college ideas" to my parents. I remember confessing to my mother, shyly but slightly self-righteously, that I had applied for a job at a women's newspaper. "You want to work with just women?" she asked. "That's not right. You shouldn't separate yourself from half of humanity. Men and women together, boys and girls together, that's how it should be. I'd get bored with just one or the other," she went on. Defeated, but secretly condemning her for her lack of

consciousness, I didn't say more.

I was having even less luck testing out my new ideas on Dad. He seemed to think my insistence on using gender-neutral language, for instance, was a symptom of weak logic. We actually got into some fights over it. He'd argue that I was losing the forest for the trees: "What, we're supposed to say 'snowperson' instead of 'snowman'? How does that help anything?" I'd get flustered and high-strung.

So at the time when my sister started parading and preening about the house, I wasn't feeling too secure as a feminist in the family setting. It seemed I could rant against MTV images of disembodied women, discuss the efficacy of affirmative action for women and debate the philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir only with my friends at college. But I knew, from the building tension in the house and my sister's growing narcissism and self-objectification, that a feminist intervention was necessary; my class-privileged, sheltered life had actually provided me with a situation in which I needed to *act*.

What to do? I worried, privately, that she was exploiting herself and setting herself up for the kinds of exploitation and abuse I had suffered at the hands of the white boys of our local public high school when I sexualized my dress and manner in high school. I wanted them to notice me, and they did—when they couldn't get the attention of any of the pretty girls from "nice" (that is, white) families. And then they wanted action, fast. And if they didn't get it, they got mad. They spread ugly rumors, harassed me, orchestrated humiliating pranks.

I had just gotten over all that, purging it as a time of insecurity and naiveté in a sexist, racist high school, when my sister seemed to be starting it all over again. Only she was getting better results: Boys were calling her on the phone; when I picked her up from the mall with her friends, she was surrounded by adoring white boys (their brothers had called me names); she was charming, lovely, flirtatious, everyone wanted to be near her.

So I was a little jealous, hating myself for feeling jealous, and

trying to use the blunt tools of my college-learned feminism to understand why and what to do. My friends advised me. "She's objectifying herself. If she sets herself up as a sexualized Other, she will never centralize herself, she'll never be truly Subject," they said. "Tell her to throw away her tight jeans!"

One morning, we were both combing our hair in front of the big bathroom mirror. She was done up in typical regalia: scant, restrictive clothes with straps and belts and chains. "Aren't you kind of uncomfortable in that?" I asked. "Nooooo," she cooed, "why should I be?" "Well, don't you wish that boys would like you even if you didn't wear things like that?" I couldn't help feeling like I was coming off as jealous or something. "They would," she said resolutely, as if I were crazy for thinking things could be otherwise. "Sonia, you wear your clothes because you like them and you like how you look in them—not just because they are comfortable," she shot at me. "So don't give me this thing like you don't care how you look." She paused. "I like these clothes for me."

Fair enough, I guessed.

She's not going to throw away the tight jeans.

Vaguely displeased with the results of my intervention, but quelled, I turned my attention elsewhere.

A year passed. I graduated from college and moved to Boston. The challenges presented me were overwhelming; home and family life seemed dreamily effortless in contrast. So I was disturbed when my mother confided in me that she was having trouble with my sister.

"She doesn't listen, she's stubborn, she's wayward, she talks on the phone all the time, she always wants to go out, she's boy-crazy!" Pause. "I bet she's having sex," she whispered.

It was brave for my mother to say this last thing. She seemed a little scared when she said it, almost as if it was profane to even think this, but what could she do? My mother grew up in a small town in southern India, the smartest girl in the family, the one they

all saved for to send to medical school. But not everyone in her family was so supported. My mother's oldest sister was abruptly taken out of school at the age of fourteen for writing a scandalous secret love letter to a local boy. Afterwards, she slit her wrists. This situation was never spoken of again. She never went back to school. She stayed in the kitchen with my grandmother and got married young, to a sensible and kind man of limited possibilities. Her sisters and brothers all live in a big world, speak many languages, are upwardly mobile. This oldest aunt stays at home all day in a dusty, exploited village and prays. She seems much older than she is.

In contrast, my mother emigrated to New York City when she was twenty-five years old, shortly after graduating from medical school and marrying my father by arrangement. He settled here first, and she followed six months later, arriving in a wintry JFK airport in her thickest sari, a woolen shawl and chappals. On her first day, while my dad was at work, she took two trains and a bus to Macy's and rode the escalators up and down, up and down, for hours, enthralled by the glitter and lights. She hadn't been on an escalator before, nor had she heard the delicate rhythmic ticking of a car's turn indicator, both of which signified the great advances and ingenuity of the New World to her. Now, perhaps, with her daughter at the brink of one of women's oldest tragedies, U.S. society did not seem so rich.

I didn't know whether my sister was having sex or not, but beyond the fact that I didn't like how she chose to express her sexuality (still those tight jeans!), I thought she should be supported if she were having sex. It's her sexuality, and any attempt on our part to rein it in would be disingenuous and oppressive, I reasoned. Sure, she's young, but with the proper guidance and support, she can gain from the wisdom of others. Knowing my mother's attitude—that is, absolute terror that her daughter may be having sex before marriage—I knew my sister would be getting no guidance from her.

Intervention Number Two. I invited her up to Boston, and we

talked about it. I told her she shouldn't do anything she doesn't want to do, she should practice safe sex, she should know what she does and does not want, and in general tried to instill a healthy mistrust of the boy's so-called expertise. She seemed prepared.

I don't know how it went with the boy, but soon afterwards, in a flurry of family disgruntlement, my sister was sent on a three-month visit to India with our extended family. Exile.

She came back changed. More introspective, less self-conscious. She had brought back presents. When I came home, my parents prodded her excitedly to show me the new *chania chorri* she had bought in India. Chania chorris are sets of midriff-baring blouses and long full skirts worn under saris. Young girls get colorful brocaded ones to wear without the sari. She put it on. It was beautiful: all covered up in the front, regal, royal looking. When she turned around, I saw that it was backless, with just two little bows holding the front part on.

I was shocked at this taboo display of flesh in full parental view. Apparently unlike my sister, I remembered my dad's stern command to us not to wear nightgowns around the house. I remembered her having to conceal her tiny outfits with big flannel shirts.

But my parents loved the backless chania chorri. Both Mom and Dad oohed and ahhed, telling her to turn around again, to wear it to an upcoming festival. She pirouetted about flirtatiously. They beamed and clapped.

I was dumbfounded, the family friction over my sister's sexuality suddenly and miraculously dissipated. Gone! No problem! Feeling suckered and resentful of my obvious misunderstanding, I gave up: We lived in different families, she and I.

It was years before I felt I finally understood the rollercoaster conflict over my sister's budding sexuality. By flaunting her tight jeans and red lipstick outfits and by insistently making boys her first priority, she was demanding parental approval for her sexuality,

obviously, as many young people do. But for us, Indian daughters isolated from India, parental approval means cultural approval. And my sister picked the wrong culture. She wore "Western" sexiness and asked her parents to say: sexy is okay, Western is okay.

Like me, she had to deal with her sexuality in the context of both white patriarchy and Indian patriarchy. When she played to white patriarchy, my parents didn't like it. They were scared of its possibilities, that she would lose her "Indian" female self, which is obedient, never talks back and doesn't have sex before marriage. I was scared too, of the possibility of violence. But when she played to Indian patriarchy, when she played the Indian coquette, all covered up but safely naughty on the side, like one of Krishna's cow-girls, they felt safe again. And so did she.

Though it didn't make sense in my cultural setting, I had tried to force my intellectualized, white feminist ideas on my family. Tell my father to use gender-neutral language! This is a man for whom English is a second, less evocative language. Tell my mother to give my sister condoms for safe sex! This is a woman who knows firsthand the tragedy that can occur when patriarchal systems are challenged. Tell my sister not to wear tight jeans and to stop shaving! She'll just revert to revealing saris, and that's no better.

I was analyzing the situation on white feminism's terms, which don't recognize cultural duality. So I thought my sister was buying into sexist myths about beauty and female sexuality, when she was seeking an appropriate cultural expression of her sexuality in a society that doesn't recognize anything outside the monoculture of "Americanism." Telling her to throw away her tight jeans was never the answer. The answer was to establish that an Indian American feminist girl doesn't have to choose between American patriarchy and Indian patriarchy. She also doesn't have to lose her culture, whatever it may be.

I could have shown her how Asian American feminists incorporate feminism into their Asian lives and their American lives, and thus create new spaces for action. That far from needing approval from the cultural guardians (either white boys or parents in this case), we can subvert both. If instead of criticizing her for wearing tight jeans I had perhaps encouraged her to wear a chorri with them, knowing what I know now, she would have been amenable, maybe even interested in doing so. And doing so at once marks her as outside of the cultural arena controlled by white patriarchy and the one controlled by Indian patriarchy. It is uniquely hers. And it gives her so much more: the ability to envision new realities.

As I realized that I couldn't simply graft white feminist ideas onto my life, things started to work out better. I explained to my dad about how feminism was also about spiritual liberation, about subverting both the internal and external cages that keep women down. I explained to my mom about how sexual experimentation, in the context of a supporting, loving environment, is useful in preparing kids for the responsibilities of adult relationships and families. A simple concern for the spirit and for the family is vitally important to them and to me; reinterpreting feminist ideas in this context lets the ideas actually get heard.