

Transcending the Borders and Binaries: Queer Social Perspectives in Contemporary Indian English Literature

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Abstract

"Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become."

Thus, said C.S Lewis, the intellectual genius of the twentieth century who wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Lewis has rightly said, literature may be the mainstream popular one or the subaltern one it always mirrors the social realities. Queer writing which was once an alien genre in Indian English literature has gained its momentum and acceptance among the Indian community in the twentieth century. It brings about a reality which has for a long time been culturally, socially and politically invisible. The invisibility of the Queer writings and the fear and trauma of the Queer community to come out of their shrinking closet is closely linked to the power dynamics and the cultural definitions of the existing social relations. When such a community which has been treated as outcasts and ostracized in the mainstream society for a long time in history is using the powerful medium of writing as a tool of weapon it gets a different dimension here. The proposed paper endeavors to examine and explore the dominant Queer Indian English literature and analyze the ways in which the writers and characters (in the works) recreates their ostracized self and identity among themselves and how they are putting forward a more liberated sexual freedom, sexual identity and sexual politics in contemporary Indian society.

Keywords: queer, homosexuality, identity, gender, heteronormativity.

Structuralism considers binary oppositions in the language as a fundamental thing, which according to Ferdinand de Saussure is the means by which the units of the language acquire its value and meaning. But when it comes to the cultural studies all the essential binaries get deconstructed, where binary opposition is thought to contradict itself and undermine its own authority. All the binaries in the language like man/ woman, homosexual/ heterosexual, civilized/ uncivilized have perpetuated and legitimized societal power structures favouring a specific majority. And these majority acquire power over time and pushes the unprivileged other to the borders making it the marginal unimportant. As a post structuralist critical endeavor Queer theory and Queer Cultural theory is addressing such binaries which privileges a particular sexuality and gender roles, and demands a shift in power equations and sexual justice. Same is the case with Queer narratives. Queer writings in India recognize the need to admit and tolerate differences and sexual diversity and it directly interrogates a sexual orthodoxy the has pathologized homosexuality and privileged heterosexuality.

Sexual minorities the world over continue to suffer various forms of prejudice and discrimination at the hands of the state and the wider society even in countries where they are legally recognized and their rights are guaranteed by the law. In India, where these communities are not even deemed to exist, their harrowing plight remains unknown to the heterosexual community, who are the majority and who are originally hostile to them. These are a group of people whose sexual identity, orientation or practices differ from the majority of the surrounding society. They are genderqueer, intersex, transgender or third gender individuals. Today universally they are known as the LGBT community or Queer community. Here in India, they were not only a marginalized community, but were also criminals under the Article 377 of the Penal Code of the Great Indian constitution.

When one analyses the Queer cultural history of India it is clearly visible that the Britishers in colonial period and the nationalists in post-colonial period tried to rewrite a multivocal sexual tradition into a univocal uniform heteronormative patriarchal tradition. In the essay *Sultan Mahmud's Makeover: Colonial Homophobia and the*

Persian-Urdu Literary Tradition Scott Kugle argues that in the colonial period in order to set up new standards of civilization and cultivation the British administrators made brutal critiquing of the then homoerotic cultural inheritance. In his own words "the homoerotic poetic tradition was attacked for its perceived homoerotic vulgarity". *Hijras*, female concubines, musicians and dancers were labeled as prostitutes, who all in the later period termed as sexual minorities who nonetheless had a somewhat respected or more accurately an accepted role in the pre-colonial Indian society.

The social activist AravindNarain, in his critical essay *No Shortcuts to Queer Utopia: Sodomy, Law and Social Change* says, "Power springs from conformity to a convenient norm so the blanket name, hijra- another way of banishing the many forms of sexual non- conformity to a realm of abhorrent amorphousness" (256). In our country there are many mythical references to the hijras, many hijra cults are associated with these mythical implications, most important of which is the Aravani cult in South India. The Ardhanarishwara form of Lord Shiva is another important mythical reference. In another kind of transformation Arjuna alters his gender not his sexuality, when he disguises himself as Brihannala, the dance and music teacher in the women's quarters at King Virata's place. Most recently, PerumalMurukan in his controversial Tamil novel *Mathirupakan*, which is translated into Malayalam under the title *Ardhanarishwaran* by Appu Jacob John, brings the image of legendary Pavatha, another form of Shiva, half male and half female at the same time.

Laxmi NrayanTripathi one of the most famous hijra activists in India in her autobiography *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* explains what is a *Hijra* according to her.

The word 'hij' refers to the soul, a holy soul. The body in which the holy soul resides is called 'hijra'. The individual is not important here. what is more important is the soul and the hijra community that possesses it. A hijra is neither a man nor a woman. She is feminine, but not a woman. He is masculine, a male by birth, but not a man either. A hijras male body is a trap-not just to the hijra itself who suffocates within it, but to the world in general that wrongly assumes a hijra to be man. (Laxmi 39-40)

Most *hijras* live on the margins of the society with a very low status; the very word hijra is sometimes used in a derogatory manner. The Indian lawyer and author Rajesh Talwar has written a book highlighting the human right abuse suffered by the community titled *The Third Sex and Human Rights*. Few employment opportunities are available to hijras. Many get their income through extortion, performance at ceremonies, begging or by sex work, an occupation of eunuchs recorded also in premodern times. Violence against hijras, especially hijra sex workers is often brutal and occurs in public spaces – police stations, prisons and their homes. As with transgender people in most of the world, they face extreme discrimination in health, housing, education, employment, immigration, law and any bureaucracy that is unable to place them into male or female gender categories.

A. Revathi, the author of *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, the first published hijra autobiography in India works with Sangama, a Bangalore based NGO for sexual minorities facing oppression. Her first book, *Unarvum Uruvum* (loosely translated as Feelings of the Whole Body) documented her field studies with the hijras in the state of Tamil Nadu. The book reveals how she fought against the ridicule, persecution and violence both within home and outside to find a life of dignity. It is clearly visible from the autobiography that the intention of the author is not seek sympathy from society or government but rather to make the heterosexual community aware of the fact that the hijras are also human beings, also have feelings, they too want to be loved and be accepted and above all they too want to live.

In the aftermath of *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, R. Raj Rao, one of the best-known gay rights activists in India and a pioneer in Indian queer literature, argues that hijra literature cannot be read in isolation as a single production. It, according to Rao, should be read along with Indian gay and lesbian literature that has boomed in recent years with novels, short stories, poems and autobiographical accounts. There are many such voices and the list is quite long, but all come out as a counter-narrative against the heterogeneous cultural hegemony in different dimensions.

When the hijras use this powerful instrument of literature they are sure that writing will make their story circulate as a political act. It shows that they refuse to live a

clandestine life. They refuse to remain invisible and come to the public sphere to tell their stories. Revathi is the author of three books *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010), *Our Lives Our Words: Telling Aravani Life Stories* (2012) and *A Life in Trans activism* (2016); LaxmiTripathi launched *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* in 2015 and then *Red Lipstick* in 2016, while ManobiBandyopadhyay published the *Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* in 2017. These works were originally written in Tamil (Vidya and Revathi), Marathi (Laxmi) and Bengali (Manobi) and translated into English, a language which provides greater visibility and international reach.

Through these path breaking autobiographies, the hijra writers actually criticize the dominant notions of masculinity and gender prejudice in the society and at the same time demands the society to reconsider the plight and pathetic condition of hijras in India. The writer's boldness urges the reader to criticize and transcend the rigid gender binary division in our society and urges us to question and reframe some of the conventional norms, prejudices and prejudices of the mainstream society.

Similar is the case with gay and lesbian writings. The emergence of lesbians as a distinctive cultural and political presence occurs in India in the context of the controversy over Indian Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, the first publicly released lesbian-themed film in India. It was in the early December 1999, just weeks before the publication of the book *Facing the Mirror, Lesbian Writings from India* (the first lesbian anthology in India) Shiv Sena – a militant right winged political party launched a frenzied assault on the screening of this film. A group of feminist activists responded to these attacks by coining the phrase 'Indian Lesbian'. These activists countered the political party's charge of inauthenticity by claiming another Indian identity- a 'lesbian identity'

In the decades prior to 1998, when the lesbian was not visible in Indian culture, works representing her came from women writers canonized within postcolonial Indian literary studies under the category 'feminist writers' or 'women writers. The most important example is that of the Urdu writer IsmatChughtai (1911-1991), who was also unfortunately destined to undergo a phase similar to that of Deepa Mehta's *Fire*. The then British government put Chughtai on trial for obscenity because of the

representation of lesbian desire in her short story "*Lihaf / The Quilt*" (1941). Renowned Malayalam writer Kamala Das, who is shortlisted for Nobel Prize has discussed homosexuality both lesbianism and gay relationships in her narratives, be it in her autobiography or in her short stories.

There are many generations of writers who took the theme of homosexuality for their creativity, in which some of them are homosexuals themselves. SunitiNamjoshi's many poems and fiction such as *Feminist Fables* (1981) and *The Conversations of Cow* (1985), of poetry of Sultan Padmsee, and of Aubrey Menen's autobiographical books *The Space Within the Heart* (1970) and *It's All Right* all belong to a single period of composition. Another generation of writers would include Vikram Seth, whose poems in *The Humble Administrator's Garden* (1985) and *The Golden Gate* (1986) comprises several poems on the theme of same sex longing. Many of Mahesh Dattani's plays, like *A Muggy Night in Mumbai* (2013) and *Night Queen* are on the theme of homosexual identity, while the poems of Agha Shahid Ali explore the notion of gay love in a veiled and circumspect way. But the most prolific writer of twentieth century India is undoubtedly, Hoshang Merchant, with over 25 collections of gay poetry to his credit, as well as the startling autobiography *The Man Who Would Be Queen* (2011). Raj Rao's gay novel *the Boyfriend*, which many reviewers called India's first full-fledged gay novel came out in 2003. LGBT anthologies are also in circulation in Indian soil. KaushalyaBannerji's *A Lotus of Another Color* (1993), Hoshang Merchant's *Yaraana* (1999), Aswani Sukthankar's *Facing the Mirror* (1999), Gautam Bhan and Aravind Narrain's *Because I have a Voice* (2006) and Minal Hjratalwala's *Out* (2012) are some of this regard. Arundhati Roy's acclaimed work *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) portrays an intersex character who is also the narrator of the novel.

It is a truth that in the twenty first century India alternate sexuality is getting accepted by the educated Indian youths in a more sociable youth circles, but when it comes to the circle of a family it still gets a taboo. In the theoretical, intellectual and academic level most educated citizens support alternate sexualities and gender identities but when it comes to the day today behaviors it is different, so there is an urgent need to change the ground reality. So when the writers use queer themes as an instrument of

literature, what they are actually doing is bridging this chasm that lies between the academic knowledge and the everyday experience and urging the people to question and reframe some of the conventional norms, pride and prejudice of the mainstream heterosexual society.

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