

Understanding Queer: Analysis of Queer Writings in Indian Literature

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Abstract

Literature mirrors human action, often reflects a picture of what man thinks, does and says in society. This aspect of reflecting society can be seen in the zenith when it is inspired by real life stories. It may seem eccentric to recognize a LGBTQIA+ literary panorama but unlike popular perception it has not only been the subject of many contemporary works, but takes root in various mythologies, philosophies and literary traditions. For instance, the Indian classical literature is so ripe with sexually diverse characters and gender variance suggesting the co-existence of various sexual identities. Queerness and alternate sexualities have always been part of discussions and debates in South Asia and thus, it is natural to have its traces in literature as well. Even during British Raj in India, stories with queer characters have been published, creating a furore over homosexuality. Current sexual identities are based on the multiplicity of tradition, modernity, colonialism and globalised views that are more often than not in conflict with one another. References to LGBTQIA+ characters in literature have been mostly stereotyped and not given substantial worth. But in the last few decades there has been a vast change in the depiction of queer (an umbrella term for LGBTQIA+ community) characters in literature, especially in Indian Literature. Several contemporary writers have attempted to encapsulate the untapped territory of the queer community through their works. The present age witnessed the trend of inclusion of various marginalised gender(s) (women, transgender and queer) in the mainstream. This welcoming change has not only showcased the broader spectrum of sexualities in the society but has also provided a platform for queer representation in its true essence in modern literature. This paper attempts to trace the lineage of queer writings in Indian literature and will analyse the representation of queer characters in them.

Keywords: Queer writings, Alternate sexualities, Lesbianism, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual, Indian Mythology, Contemporary Indian Literature, Archetypal Criticism.

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Alternate Sexuality in Hindu Mythology

Seeing LGBTQIA literary panoramas in India may seem strange. This theme is not only the subject of many contemporary works, but also rooted in literary traditions and Indian philosophy. Traditional Indian literature is rich with sexually ambiguous personalities, homoerotic encounter and gender inconsistencies, which may suggest the existence of a third gender. Many sexual identities coexist in our ancient literature. Hindu mythology, via advanced heroes and instances, has displayed factors of gender variance and non-heterosexual sexuality. Hindu mythology makes consistent references to queer, the concept that questions the belief of a male or a female. The acceptance and normality of alternate sexuality in Hindu stories, symbols and rituals exhibit a stark contrast to the lack of knowledge and tension that we see in modern Indian society. When we see it within the context of the modern-day legal guidelines in opposition to homosexuality, primarily based totally on colonial legal guidelines, it suggests that it resisted sexual norms and the typically perceived gender binary. Indian constitution has constantly upheld secularism and human rights. However, this courtesy is unfortunately not extended to queer community. While the reproductive connection between male and female has constantly been honoured, homosexuality and queer relations had been documented through traditional literature, folktales, scriptures, performing arts alike. Essentially due to the fact that gender is often considered as an idea, a belief, a conviction, the arc and scale of which can be visualised through diverse characters, each unusual and astonishing.

In Mahabharata, Arjuna, one of the Pandavas, is cursed to spend one year as a eunuch, and is converted into Brihannala, a track and dance teacher. There are many episodes similarly in which Arjuna undergoes sex-change. In the Padma Purana, Arjuna, after acquiring approximately the character of one of the Gopis of Lord Krishna, embarks on a protracted and windy adventure amongst meditation, Tantric yoga and prayer till his rebirth as a girl known as Arjuni.

Mohini, female avatar of Lord Vishnu, who shows gender variability, even becomes pregnant with Lord Shiva. Together he (Vishnu) and Lord Shiva give birth to Lord Ayyappa. Each time Vishnu, the protector of the universe, took the female avatar of the divine enchantress Mohini, to protect the world from demons. Vishnu becomes Mohini many times when gender-adaptability (femininity) is called for, to protect the universe. Beyond the role of the saviour, the impact on dual gender and fluid sexuality is more similar for men and women in each person. The idea of gender transition in Vedic texts is considered to be creation of "Ardhanarishvara" manifested by the union of Shiva and Parvati. It is a symbol of the mysterious integration of energy of two genders into one. A very famous Archetypal critic C.G. Jung used the same concept with his terms – "Anima" and "Animus".

Some versions of the Kritivasa Ramayana mentions the story of two queens who conceived a child together, Bhagiratha- he who was born from two vulvas. Later Bhagiratha was credited for bringing the river Ganges down to earth. It is common to deny the existence of queerness

in our mythical stories, or to place them in the realm of the supernaturalism. Nevertheless, they continue to be told and shown over and over again by our ancient literature like a very clear mention can be trace in an Indian epic – “Kamasutra”.

Homophobia during the British Raj

Not accepting homosexuality is strongly associated with colonial rule. British rule has built a strong link between sexual identity and the struggle for national freedom. The first work of Hindi fiction to highlight gay relations which created a furore over homosexuality was a collection of eight short stories entitled *Chocolate* in 1927 by Hindi nationalist writer Pandey Bechan Sharma (1900-1967), better known by his pen-name ‘Ugra’ meaning “extreme”. This work sparked off the first major public debate about homosexuality and gay rights in modern India. Many eminent figures, including Mahatma Gandhi, weighed in on the debates. Its publication had a dual effect. Ugra notes: “Lines of worry appeared on the brows of the grave; frivolous laughter coloured the cheeks of the shallow.” Ugra claimed that these stories would help the nation to get rid of “vice” but his critics argued the opposite. Not many overtly defended Ugra in public, but some justified his work by arguing that it was the artist’s job to educate through provocation. The collection had faced criticism by those who were outraged by its titillating portrayal of homosexuality and labelled the obscene. The stories raised salient issues concerning the role of fiction in relation to society, the meanings and morality of same sexuality and the civil rights of gay people. Even after several decades, these issues are pertinent and continuous in debates.

These stories depict male homoeroticism in quotidian circumstances. In the title story, ‘Chocolate’, published on 31 May 1924, in *Matvala*, lovesick Dinkar Prasad, likened to *Majnun* by the narrator brings his lover Ramesh to his disapproving friend’s house. In ‘Paalat’ (Kept Boy), Shriramcharanji frequently quotes Urdu and Sanskrit verses, famous poets like Bihari, Surdas, Tulsidas and Raskhan in his defence while confessing his affair with a young boy, HarisundarVarma. ‘Hum FidayeLakhnau’, shows the extent of rage against homosexuality when narrator wishes death sentence for Prasad Babu. ‘KamariyaNagin Si BalKhaye’ appears to be loosely based on Ugra’s theatre days’ experiences. The story takes forward the debate between “sin” and “happiness”, ending with the police punishing the “sinners”. ‘Chocolate Charcha’, is a self-reflexive discussion of the controversy around Ugra’s stories published in *Matvala*. It is pivotal for its depiction of male college students in love with the “good-looking” classmates, where women are not unavailable to them. The most homophobic story amongst the collection is ‘Hey Sukumar’, with its hysterical denunciations of men putting their arms around one another, citing homosexuality as the cause of tuberculosis and death. ‘VyabhichariPyar’ blames western education, and suggests visiting female prostitutes as the “remedy”. Ellipses appear whenever a sexual act is referred to. The only story that features male-male desire in absence of females is ‘Jail Mein’. The pursuit of chocolate, a punishable crime is openly committed in prisons, right under the government’s nose. Ugra’s depictions of homosexuality are deeply ambivalent. The stories represent the homosexually inclined man as a sort of modern version of the *nagaraka*(city-dweller), who quote Hindi and Urdu poetry to express their “chocolate desire”.

IsmatChughtai's short story Lihaaf attracted controversy as soon as it was published in an Urdu literary journal titled Adaab-i-Latif in 1941. The story created a huge uproar among its readers. Although the story does not make any direct reference to homosexuality, it gained massive notoriety for the depiction of the relationship between Begum Jaan and her maid, Rabbu with sexual overtones. Chughtai was charged with obscenity for the language she used and a trial against her was held in Lahore court. In her memoir, 'A Life in Words', Chughtai wrote: "I am still labelled as the writer of Lihaaf. The story brought me so much notoriety that I got sick of life. It became the proverbial stick to beat me with and whatever I wrote afterwards got crushed under its weight." Lihaaf brought to light the repressed sexual desires of female in a heteronormative marriage.

Queer Space in India

Queer space in Indian literature have been stigmatised and censored since they are marginalised in mainstream culture. The prominence of Indian gay people in the literary world has been challenging in the face of homophobic demographics, whose conception of queerness has been shaped by the colonial values and its understanding of gender spaces. With the arrival of the twenty-first century, India was so influenced by "western" British culture that it accepted 19th century British beliefs as its own. Gradually, India entered a phase of individual identity as a nation, with ideals of secularism or empowerment infiltrating the public' imaginations. Another aspect of this was liberty - liberty from foreign domination, which had already been won; now all that remained was to attain liberty from the evil that resided within. In this background, the caste system, poverty, unemployment, altering gender roles, and so on were critical. The Indian Constitution was being drafted, and India was preparing for its long-awaited and desired status of Swaraj. The land of Kama-sutra experienced a stunning awakening and learned that something considered carnal had never existed in its history. In modern times, homoerotic and so-called 'queer' connections run via various lanes and by-lanes of ancient Indian literature, which still have an impact on several modern-day festivals and rituals. Despite the fact that characters such as Shikhandi and Mohini are vital parts of ancient Indian literature, people prefer to be absolutely vague about their identity. "Some of the most private of the 'private troubles' in my understanding are possibly the sexual and erotic aspects of human life which are missing from sociological concerns in India and South Asia" (Kumar). In 2008, the state of Tamil Nadu recognised the "Third Gender," with its civil supply department including a new sex column as 'T' in the ration card, in addition to the customary 'M' and 'F' for males and females, respectively. This was the first occasion that Indian authorities officially recognised the third gender. Chennai 2009 is a watershed moment in India's queer activist history. The Delhi High Court decriminalised homosexuality, effectively overturning the criminal legislation that classified same-sex relationships and activities as an 'unnatural offence.' In doing so, some portion of the infamous Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) was declared null and void on the grounds that criminalising consenting sexual conduct in private violated the fundamental rights granted to the individual under the Indian Constitution. The decision was made as a result of an initiative by the Naz Foundation, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that works in the interests of people and human rights.

Queer Writings in Contemporary Indian Literature

A developing interest in queer studies flourished in Indian Literature during 1970s which helped to extrude the obscurantist temper and to throw light on the LGBTQIA+ scene. With a few notable exceptions, Indian scholars have always maintained a learned silence on the subject of homosexuality and considered it as a myth or an import from the west. Thus, this ignorance can be quoted as the reason for the homophobia represented in modern Indian literature. One book, considered as the first educational book on homosexuality in post-independence era was "The World of Homosexuals", published in 1977 which was written by Shakuntala Devi, containing personal interviews of homosexuals across the globe. Ruth Vanita and SaleemKidwai, historians, investigate the ramifications of the British Raj in their book "Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History" and found that the basis for homophobia was an anti-sodomy law passed in 1861, making homosexuality a criminal offence.

Rabindranath Tagore played an important role in shaping the literary landscape of Bengal and the rest of the country. Tagore's work emphasises queer identity significantly. Tagore illustrates a homosocial tie and the affection that is embedded in it without any overt sexuality. Mahesh Dattani, one of the most prominent dramatists in modern Indian English, speculated that homosexuality existed in India since antiquity, it has never acquired social approval and has thus been viewed as a taboo subject throughout the millennia. Dattani's theatrical writings have tackled homosexuality with great assurance, bringing it from the margins to the centre stage. Because of its subject matter, the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, which deals with the problematic gay relationships and the futile attempt of a gay man to pursue his relation and thus have his being through a deceptive strategy, caused a stir in Mumbai in its first stage performance on November 23, 1998.

While there has been a shift in public opinion on acceptance of gay rights, conservative voices in the country continue to depict LGBT groups and individuals as dangerous anything foreign to "Indian culture" and a tainted by "Western influence". In contrast to this homosexuality-as-a-Western-disease rhetoric, renowned academics such as Ruth Vanita, as well as SaleemKidwai, GitiThadani, and DevduttPattanaik, have proven that plurality and liminal states have traditionally been producers of queer tales imbued in Indian cultural history. These scholars' initiatives, which are frequently done in response to conservative efforts, seek to demonstrate how the queer has always been present in the fabric of Indian society, even if what that means has evolved over the years. This body of work has been extremely important in interrupting modern discourses that seek to alienate queer communities in India from their own cultural roots, and while these projects have been criticised as exercises in retrospective reading, they continue to be critical in maintaining a plurality of canons. Gita Thadani's *Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India* was one of the first examples of queer recovery research in India (1996). Another example of this genre is DevduttPattanaik's *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore* (2002). *My Story* (1973), first published in Malayalam, is a canonical presence in nonfiction, it is writer Kamala Das's once-scandalous autobiography, in which she details

several of her intimate connections with women. 'Vivek and I,' by Mayur Patel, is about a teacher who has feelings for a pupil at his school. R Raj Rao, a literature professor in Pune, created 'Hostel Room 131,' a novel about a blooming love tale in an engineering student hostel. In fact, his novel, 'The Boyfriend,' published in 2003, was one of the first gay novels written in English in India. Rahul Mehta's collection of short stories, 'Quarantine,' was published in 2010. Continuing the tradition, Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla's novel 'The Exiles' is about an extramarital affair of a homosexual man. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's Malayalam novel Shabdangal (Voices) was declared obscene in 1947 because it portrayed male homosexuality. It told the tale of a soldier who fell in love with a transgender man. Finally, the soldier is died by a sexually transmitted disease. Similarly, Kamleshwar's Hindi novel EkSadakSattavanGaliyan caused uproar since it showed a truck driver and a part-time robber abducting a young guy. While a few of diasporic writers, such SunitiNamjoshi and Vikram Seth, began to publish queer work in the 1980s, the 1990s and 2000s saw a spike in queer literature in India. ShobhaDe's early pulp fiction works are noteworthy, particularly Strange Obsession (1992), which featured a strong lesbian heroine. Following that, two notable anthologies were published: Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing in India (1999), edited by AshwiniSukthankar, and Yaraana: Gay Writing from India (1999), edited by Hoshang Merchant. In other works, queer characters are cast members, such in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe (2001), which deals with both homosocial settings and lesbian desire through the narrative of four women characters. A Married Woman (2002), on the other hand, is a strong narrative about a woman progressively regaining her agency and sexuality after growing tired of a life controlled by patriarchal expectations. Kapur's writing about sexual desire is renowned for its candour and explicitness. AbhaDawesar'sBabyji (2005), on the other hand, is breathtakingly provocative, as its sixteen-year-old protagonist participates in three quite different encounters with an older woman, her maid, and a classmate. A number of these works could be characterised as "traditional" coming-out stories, but what is particularly interesting about them is how they are positioned and how, in their availability in India, they challenge conventional conceptions of place, subversion, and belonging. In reality, this new gay writing became one of the ways in which Indianness travelled and circulated transnationally, and was plundered and reabsorbed into different cultural matrices and contexts, particularly in the 2000s.

Of all, the Supreme Court's decision in September 2018 to strike down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code will not miraculously eliminate all conservative opposition. Its removal will not herald a "return" to a pluralistic, pre-colonial India free of colonial influence. India must engage not only with its varied previous societies, but also with its present society, especially gay subcultures and their dis/engagement from/with Western queer conventions. According to the Supreme Court verdict, homosexuality is becoming less stigmatised in India. While there is still a long way to go in terms of giving queer people a prominent voice, modern literature has played an important, contemporary role in reflecting queer Indian life in all of their literary expressions.

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