

## **Cloaked in Shadows and Bloomed in *Fire*: A Critical Engagement on the Radical Potential of Indian Queer Literary Narratives**

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**Abstract:** “Every nation has a historical moment when it comes into its own and burst upon the world’s consciousness. Such a moment has already been defined by their literature for India’s women and Dalits. I am humbled to have been entrusted with defining the historic moment for India’s homosexuals through their literature, old and new, heroic or pedestrian, lovely and lovelorn, or rough and ironic.” (*Yaraana*)

Thus said Hoshang Merchant, a Zoroastrian poet, an English professor and more importantly an open gay writer and activist who edited the anthology *Yaraana* (1999) subtitled *Gay Writing from South Asia* in its introduction. Along with Deepa Mehta’s ground breaking film *Fire* (1996) Hoshang Merchant edited *Yaraana* and Aswani sukhtankar edited *Facing the Mirror* (1999) are two potentially inflammable titles when it comes to the Queer cultural discourses in India. Sexuality is the most personal and private, the most public and the most political issue that engages us both intellectually and practically in everyday life. It is the cultural definitions and social norms that defines, accepts, normalizes and rejects particular sexual orientations in a society. As Jeffrey Weeks points out in his work *Sexualities* “each culture labels certain practices as appropriate or inappropriate, moral or immoral, healthy or perverted”. Thus monogamous heterosexual marriage that guarantees children are the accepted norm and others especially alternate sexuality is considered something that is against the rules of the nature and immoral. Alternate sexuality is rejected both because of its non-procreative nature and because of its innate capacity to dismantle the existing power equations in the prevalent society. The injunctions against alternate sexuality are also part of a broader pattern of policing sexuality that threatens to disrupt the norms of societal relations. Indian society though it is multicultural and multilingual which celebrates diversity and differences, there is always an inherent reluctance to acknowledge and accept alternate sexuality claiming it as a western imported phenomena which needs treatment through good *samskar* or culture. It is here Queer theory and Indian Queer cultural representations become relevant. The invisibility of the Queer representations including the literary narratives in India is part of the morality which considers homosexuality as sin and aberration. Though the term Queer has originated as a derogatory term, it has undergone a process of evolution and now stands as a term of self-identification. It is an umbrella term embracing a matrix of sexual preferences, gender expressions and habits that are not of the heterosexual heteronormative or gender binary majority.

Queer narratives which was once an alien genre in Indian English literature gained its momentum and acceptance in the Indian academia and among the reading public of India in the twenty-first century, which in a way slightly altered the cultural definitions and power dynamics in the existing social relations and brought about a reality which was for a long time been culturally, socially and politically invisible or been cloaked in shadows. The proposed paper endeavors to critically examine and

explore some of the monumental queer narratives and analyze how it paved the way for a new intellectual thinking and mirrors a reality of marginalization and try to put forth a new liberating sexual politics in Indian culture.

**Keywords:** Queer, Homosexuality, Identity, Gender, Heteronormativity, Alternate Sexuality.

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## INTRODUCTION

Penguin India, the leading publishing house in India during the period of 1999 issued two inflammable titles which actually stunned the English readers in India. It not only made the middleclass class Indian aware of the diverse sexual and gender orientation prevalent among society but also challenged the whole publishing industry to openly address and instigate critical debates on the theme of alternate sexuality. The first was *Facing the Mirror; Lesbian writing from India* and the second *Yaraana* subtitled *Gay writing from India* in 2010 Penguin India reissued *Yaarana* in an elaborate version with the subtitle *Gay Writing from South Asia*. Here a change happens the country name in the former title i.e. India gets replaced by a continental name, it suggests inclusion, acceptability, and recognition. It was right after the release of Indian Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (1999). The movie depicted the homoerotic romance between two women, who are actually married and who finds their sexual liberation in lesbian relationship. When the movie was released political parties especially the right wing political parties launched fieriest protests against the movie claiming it as a corruption of Indian culture by the west an argument grounded on the diasporic status of the director and the film's funding by the western sources. Many stated and still believe lesbianism and homosexuality as a western imported phenomenon which unquestionably has no meaning in Indian soil and can only represent an inauthentic Indian. But the flag bearers of homophobia are may be ignorant of the historical evidence engraved in 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century temple architecture and sculpture of Khajurao which evidently represents Yogini Mela ( a version of lesbian relationship). There are many temples in India which very artistically represents homoerotic sculptures and paintings. Similarly the classical and medieval narrative texts of Indian origin also doesn't deny the existence of alternate sexuality in Indian soil. Classical and Medieval India has produced a vast majority of literary narratives, but among all those a single work of the classical India stands out: Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra*. It is not its narrative aspects that make it popular in both orient and occident at the same time but the fame rests actually in the treatment of sex in a more mechanical aspects, although that actually forms only a part of its subject matter. Michael J. Sweet in his article "Enuchs, Lesbians, and Other Mythical Beasts; Queering and Dequeering the *Kama Sutra*" suggests,

The insatiable thirst of the modern West for sex knowledge from the mystic and lubricious East has resulted in the publication of hundreds of versions of the *Kama Sutra* including translations, recastings, expositions and specially illustrated versions ranging from the coffee-table book with its glossy pictures of Indian erotic statuary to pornographic videos, not to speak of cards, lotions, massage oils of all flavors (who can forget the "Kama Sutra Love Oil" of the 1960s?), tapestries and even bottle openers. (Queering India,77)

Likewise, the Smritis of Manu and Arthasasthra of Kautilya also recognizes the homosexuality or alternate sexuality but doesn't support it, as it carries the inherent power to replicate the power equations in social structure and can threaten to disrupt the norms and rules of societal relations.

When the movie *Fire* was released all over the country another blazing protests arose, that from women wing of right wing political parties. Their argument was if woman's sexual desires be fulfilled through lesbianism then the institution of marriage and the reproduction of human beings will stop. But the irony is of the fact that these protesters became aware of two things by the movie, firstly that a biologically born female can be attracted to another biologically born female, secondly if such desires gets encouraged then the most solid manifestation and foundation of patriarchy i.e. The institution of 'family' will collapse. Which would eventually subvert or deconstruct the patriarchal heteronormativity in society. It is a sad truth that many women who were engaged in the protest may be victims of different kinds of exploitations of patriarchy, many may be closeted lesbians and many may be unaware of the liberating possibilities of homosexual desires. It is here Adrienne Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* becomes relevant, in which she points out compulsory heterosexuality is a political strategy of the patriarchy which ensure male's authority over female and priorities sexual desires of male. The second sex status attributed to women over time and their presumed weak, emotional, nurturing character which considered innate to their nature in all these years also contributed to the compulsory heterosexual choice of most women.

The introduction of *Facing the mirror; Lesbian Writing from India* begins with a question, "Are there any lesbian writers in India? Are there any lesbians in our country who have been published and feted, their sexuality acknowledged?". The editor of the anthology Aswani Shukthankar says the answer is 'not' because in our country they are invisible, their existence here is like scattered fireworks, here and there. In the passage 'Silence and Invisibility' of the text *Facing the Mirror*, the lesbian writer and feminist activist Giti Thdani says...

Ignorance. When something is ignored it will gradually lose any vitality it once had, first becoming invisible and then finally disappearing altogether. If memory is not passed on in some coherent way, that which is not remembered no longer exists, and it can then be said that it never existed. This is what is happening to the histories of lesbian sexualities in our country. (*Facing*, 149)

In another article titled 'Reflection of an Indian Lesbian', writer Naseem says that for her lesbianism is a part of a deliberate stance adopted in opposition to patriarchy. She says- "lesbianism is a form of resistance to patriarchy and male oppression and not just a sexual preference for me." (331) Another writer says,

If it had been possible for me to have grown up in a country or society in which men didn't exploit women, I might not have been a lesbian at all. My abhorrence was not necessarily revulsion towards the male sex, but towards the treacherous mentality of the men I had met. I shut myself off from men because the way they treat me as a mere object really assaulted my feelings. (*Facing*, 324)

It is clearly visible from the book *Facing the Mirror* that it celebrates creativity and coming together, but at the same time it is also a grieving for the women who were denied of the freedom and choice to express themselves and write out their stories, their life. The book cross examines some of the fundamental problems of Lesbians like how they are been ridiculed, mischaracterized and ignored from the reality and how their legitimacy and credibility is continuously interrogated. The book's ninety nine narratives are actually a doubly marginalized community's revelations and reflections on life. Here they are using a powerful medium 'writing', to express themselves and to come out in rainbow colors from their shrinking closet.

When it comes to the second text *Yaraana* edited by gay writer professor Hoshang Merchant the title itself becomes a significant start. The very use of the Hindi word *Yaar* which denote friendship gets appropriated here to replace with the mere camaraderie to a heightened level of male homosexual romance. According to Merchant as Raj Rao pointed out "Merchant chose the word *Yaraana* for his title on purpose. To him the word represented that grey area between friendship and love for which the English Language has no equivalent."(Criminal Love.64). In his introduction to *Yaraana*, Merchant says, India's Hindu culture which is a shame culture rather than a guilt culture treats homosexual practice with secrecy but not with malice"(Merchant,1999:xii). It is clearly evident from the honor killings still happening in our country, where shame is the foundational stone of all diversions. *Yaraana* included all the major literary genres like poetry, fiction, drama, non-fiction which in a way radically altered the literary compilations. Because until then all literary compilations were genre-specific.

There is a serious allegation from the Indian reading community regarding the use of language in portrayed in LGBT narratives. Some claims it abusive, shallow while comparing the popular mainstream literary narratives, erotic and pornographic without any heighten literary quality. There were even academicians who refused to teach transgender autobiographies in their classes. The usual comparison of LGBT literature with award winning literary narratives leads to a conclusion of later as cheap pulp fiction. But the hard truth is that when a Hijra writer uses the medium of language and chooses the genre of autobiography as a tool of self-expression they actually using these mediums as a political tool to make the mainstream society aware of the fact that they are also human beings and they too have a right to lead a dignified life guaranteed by the constitution of India. There is an attempt from Queer Scholar and Theoretician Hoshang Merchant in defining Queer Aesthetics and how it differs from the canonical literature by making a reading on R. Raj Rao's Queer poem in the chapter titled "Politics of the Avant-Garde in the monumental Queer critical reading text *Forbidden Sex/ Texts*. He says...

The language is explosive, shocking. The original reaction is that of revulsion ( *bihatsa* in Sanskrit rasa theory ) or at best derision or mockery. The motive is to evoke a reaction to homosexuality from the complacent bourgeois....The underlying serious intent is to shake bourgeois gently itself. Bourgeois gentility is based on genteel language. This genteel language clocks a lot of violence with (in) family, within social structures. By attacking this language of hypocrisy he (Rao) attacks hypocrisy itself. First appearing frivolous, he turns deadly serious, making us first uncomfortable and then marvel at his linguistic jetes. (Criminal Love,120)

In her introduction to the work *Out: Stories from the New Queer India* (published by Queer Ink, a publishing house which is exclusively devoted to the Indian LGBT writings), editor Minal Hajratwala writes...

Writing has been vital to the LGBT movement in India from the beginning: stapled photocopies of lesbian poems and art; protest petitions and letters to the editor; meticulous research that mines the subcontinent's rich history for the proof of same-sex love in centuries past- decisively refuting the argument that it is a Western import. The rich and varied body of writing that has been emerging in India includes a number of earlier anthologies and studies; regional periodicals; the vast blogphere, and a small but growing list of novels and autobiographies round out the bookshelf. The world has always been a vital element of the cause. (Hajratwala,2012:12-13)

There are many generations of writers who took the theme of homosexuality for their creativity, in which some of them are homosexuals themselves. Suniti Namjoshi'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. Kaushalya Bannerji'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 Hjrattwala's *Out* (2012) are some of this regard. Arundhati Roy's acclaimed work *The Ministry of U Utmost Happiness* (2017) portrays an intersex character who is also the narrator of the novel.

Everyone are familiar with the provocative query of Gyathri Chakravathy Spivak "can the subaltern speak?" Would it be more appropriate if it would be 'can any subject speak?'. Because in our country India anyone in any marginalized community is a subject who is constantly exploited, used, ridiculed and manipulated and even denied of many rights including the fundamental right, the right to live. The socio, economic political marginalization of a community or a group of people leads to the gradual invisibility of them. This is what happening to the sexual minority in our country. The invisibility of the Queer representations including the literary narratives in India is part of the morality which considers homosexuality or alternate sexuality as sin and aberration. Though the term Queer has originated as a derogatory term, it has undergone a process of evolution and now stands as a term of self-identification. The Queer narratives of today's which in a way slightly altered the cultural definitions and power dynamics in the existing social relations and brought

about a reality which was for a long time been culturally, socially and politically invisible or been clocked in shadows. These narratives in a way paved a way for a liberating sexual politics and a new intellectual critical thinking in Indian academia.

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