

Queer Literature in India: Visible Voices of the Sexual Subalterns

Aditi Chakraborty

Gandhi Fellow, Piramal Foundation, India

Abstract: *In 1998, it rained fire in Indian theatres with Deepa Mehta's film Fire. This film brought out the unspoken truth of female sexuality in Indian homes, ie, the idea of a lesbian relationship. The film shook the nation and was seen as a tool to corrupt Indian sexual ethics. The idea of Queer was seen as a post-colonial literature and it created a new socio-political diaspora. Not only it discusses sexuality but also the theme of gender roles and power play and taboos faced under patriarchy. The transgender also gained its representation in Kamala Das's poem Dance of the Eunuchs. The themes of effeminacy and misogyny found concrete grounds in the works of Rabindranath Tagore. The realism in relationships and in the power hierarchy was mirrored through this form of diaspora but it failed to be inclusive. Queer studies bring out the voices of the subaltern with their repressed sexuality. The idea of the new woman is just not the independent one but also whose sexual desires are important. Queer literature in India has been hiding in the banner of feminism and has its own demarcation. Today with the rise of activism, it is out of its own closet but has not been given the literary freedom or inclusivity by the popular verdict. My paper explores how this literature has been visible and vocal throughout to be a catalyst of respite for the repressed sexual minorities of the nation.*

Keywords: Queer, literature, lesbian, sexuality, gender, homophobia, subaltern, Tagore, Chughtai, Kamala Das, transgender

1. Introduction

Marginalized in the mainstream culture, queer spaces in Indian literature have been under the umbrella of taboo and censorship. The Indian queer's visibility in the literary space has been difficult amidst the homophobic demography, whose idea of queerness has been conditioned on the colonial values and its perception of gender spaces.

In post-colonial India, queer identity has been pushed towards the sidewalk, but the process of reclaiming its space and existence in the literary narrative is reviving. The queer identity in Indian literature was visible and vocal from Vedic ages till the colonial rule, but today it fights to portray the repressed voices of the sexual subaltern of the nation.

The sexual politics of post-colonial India, saw the queer to be a threat to heterosexual uniformity. Seen as a perversion from the established heterosexual norm that needed to be purged from the nation, the queer became the illegitimate sexual citizens in post-colonial India.

Historians, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, in their work "Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History", closely examine the consequences of the British anti-sodomy law in 1861 as the foundation of homophobia, labelling homosexuality as a criminal offence. The invisibility of the sexual minorities is increased with the presence of Islam and Christianity in the country, where homosexuality and queer identity is considered to be blasphemous.

Rigid heterosexual norms have been manifested by Right-wing political parties in India who proclaim queer identity goes against the basic foundation of a Hindutva state. The post-colonial identity of the queer has been suppressed under a false sense of nationhood that constricts the space for alternative gender narratives. The queer identity comes in conflict with the procreative duties of the citizens of the

nation. The idea of nation in the Indian context is a symbol to that of a mother; if the queer exists, hence, the procreation would come to a halt. The nationalist with their banner of procreation and protecting the sanctity of women considered the queer identity to be an imported product from West.

Author Benedict Anderson gives us a definition of a nation by referring to it as "imagined spaces". He further elaborates by saying that in a nation, homogeneity is not present as people of multiple identities are bound by a feeling of common culture and values. Going by Anderson's definition of "imagined spaces", one can also say that the queer community in India also an imagined community created by the citizens.

The literary queer narratives speak about the metaphor of the "closet". The closet becomes a space where every queer identity can survive without the public gaze. It is a symbol of the repression of their sexual desires. Queer identity in India is a personal choice that chooses to fight against the hegemony of heterosexuality as the only gender behaviour.

2. Queer Identity in Hindu Mythology and Folklore

The Hindu tradition is devoid of the concept of gender categorization based on one's sexual orientation. In the ancient Sanskrit texts, the third gender has been described as the male with effeminate characteristics or behaviour. Unlike, the heterosexuals, they could give and receive penetration as they could change their gender from male to female. Hence, they could take up both the sexual roles of a dominant male and a submissive female. The flow of queer identity has been rooted in the Indian folklore and mythology. The queer and the presence of alternate sexual identities was acceptable in the mainstream culture.

Today, the queer has become the sexual subalterns, whose voices have been erased to the brink of invisibility. If

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accepted during the Vedic ages, why is that their voices have been suppressed in the Indian literary narratives?

Indian literature is the uterus of the literature of multicultural identities and religious practices. The stories of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in the Vaishnava tradition of the eastern part of India, describes the admiration of a male god, Krishna, by his male devotee, Chaitanya. Instances from Hindu mythological text gives validation for the approval of same-sex desire under the Divine will.

The "Ramayan" written by Bengali author, Kritibash Ojha, mentions the birth of Bhagirath, resulting from the conjugal union of two women with the divine approval of the God Shankara. The divine intervention in these texts may be a motif for insemination from the male gods, or, it is used for legitimising homosexuality in the presence of a supernatural entity whose will cannot be questioned.

In these folklores, sex change and gender ambiguity also become a part of the deity's identity. The queer identity of Lord Vishnu is presented in his avatar or incarnation as Mohini, the enchantress, who made the demons give up the elixir of immortality. The Puranas mentions the union of Shiva and Mohini resulting in the birth of Ayappa. Ayappa or Harihara Putra becomes the example of the sexual union between two male gods.

The "Mahabharata" also mentions the queer avatar of Mohini. In the epic, Mohini conjugates with Arjun's son Aravan before sacrificing him. Aravan's acceptance of Vishnu's queerness led to the practice of Aravani tradition in Kovugam, Tamil Nadu.

The Vedic texts represented a social order in which the queer identity not only existed but was also respected. Today, the queer has managed to survive and showcase its repressed voices through cracks of these folklores.

The notion of gender transitions and role play in the Vedic texts is considered to be the manifestation of Ardhanarishivara created by the union of Shiva and Parvati. It is a symbol of the synthesis of the mystical energies of the two genders into one entity.

The third gender and the androgynous identity, in the mythology, represented prowess and valour as shown with the character of Shikhandi in the "Mahabharat". Born as Shikhandini, she was unsexed by a Yaksha to fight Bhishma in the great war. Even, Arjun, the great warrior, had gone through sex change under the curse of Urvashi. He became a "kinnar" and took the name Brihanalla. As Brihanalla, Arjun taught the music dance in the court of King Virata. Through his character, Arjun challenges the classical notion of masculinity and accepts his androgynous nature.

Stories and legends patronize the Bahuchara Mata, the goddess of the Hijras or the transgenders. She is linked to gender transition and castration of the impotent male. Ancient Indian literature also includes the Hindu philosophical notion of the existence of the "Tritiya Prakriti" or the third nature. This happens to include the queer

identities such as androgynous male, transsexuals, transgenders, etc.

The erotic text of ancient India, the Kamasutra, gives the transgender and the homosexuals marital rights. It accepts the existence of the lesbian, referring to her as the "Svairini" or the independent one, who is sexually overt and seeks carnal pleasure from her own kind.

Analysing the Hindu mythological texts, one can identify the changing pattern of the social boundaries in four "Yugas". The "Satya Yuga" embodies a patriarchal conformity to the moral code of conduct. The structure of ethics collapses in the "Kali Yuga" with impurity and corruption entering the social framework causing anarchy.

Mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik ties up the debate of gender and morality within the socio-political framework. He remarks that the binary structure of gender confines independent and individual gender roles and sexuality under a strict moral hegemony. The individual identity resists the hegemonic structure to express one's independent existence. Pattanaik, further, opines the existence of alternative sexualities in the society contradicts the binary gender model. This leads to the fear of the unknown identities and with it the social disorder is created. The queer in the mythology needs to be viewed from the political and religious angles. The gender roles in the literary narratives of the folklore have turned into the artistic metaphors of mirrors reflecting the social reality.

Pattanaik's analogical reference of the Indian mythology has encouraged the unorthodox interpretations of these ancient texts. It brings into the surface the queer voices present in the Hindu culture, thereby negating the Right-wing parochial definition and notion of the queer existence in India.

3. Tagore and the coerced Masculine identity

Rabindranath Tagore had a significant role in moulding the literary space in Bengal and the rest of the country. his socio-political commentaries on nationalism, freedom, and education developed a new school of thought in the 20th century. Tagore envisioned an education system which would be beyond the classroom walls. According to Tagore, real knowledge is present in nature. His short stories and the characters go through the struggles of fighting with walls society has created and their attempt to find freedom within oneself. The queer identity is strongly highlighted in Tagore's work. He critiques the coerced masculine and feminine gender roles constructed under the colonial framework of the 19th-20th century.

The short story "Sampadak" or "The Editor", weaves a tale about a man, who in order to take care of his daughter, has to enter the threshold of the domestic life, which was once the domain area of his deceased wife. Searching for means to make ends meet, he gets a job of an editor (sampadak) which gives him a respite from his domestic duties and earn him the social label of "the breadwinner" in the family rather than the taunt of a homemaker. With the protagonist's profession, Tagore shows the importance of masculinity

even when choosing a profession. The editor's job uplifts his social status and most importantly his self-esteem. The pen with which he writes becomes a phallic symbol by which he is able to exert himself on paper and exercise control over the words written on paper. Fame is a fickle friend, and it is shortlived by the protagonist when a rival publication is established in the village by the zamindar. His desperation to matter and be a person of relevance in the public sphere makes him detached from the familial duties. This creates a reversal of roles in the relationship he has with his daughter. The young daughter takes up the role of a caregiving mother as his father feels ashamed to embrace his natural role.

In the "Sampadak", Tagore depicts the folly of coerced manhood which only derives its strength from oppressing the women or the economically weak. To substantiate his masculinity, he evades the support a motherless child requires. Tagore brings into notice the boundary between the inner and the outer spaces and the way gender roles are created for each of them. It points a finger towards the sexual politics in the society, where the outer space is the man's territory that demonstrates his economic productivity. The inner world is exclusively kept for the women in accordance to her benevolent and caregiving role. The male, however, fails to understand the arduous task involved in the duties of a female, as reflected in the protagonist's remarks: "When my wife was alive, I didn't give much thought to Prabha. I never considered what care and effort were needed to bring up a child."

If the spaces were so exclusive, can either of them be overlooked, when both includes gender fluidity and transition? The answer lies in the momentum of the transition. The transitory phase creates a spatial territory for the queer identity. The editor finds redemption in his familial duties as he loses control over the public sphere. His queer identity resides in his transition from a known public space to the forbidden and unknown private space.

Tagore's nationalist novel "Ghare Baire" (Home and the World) gives a comparison of the main characters through the gender dynamics of the society. The male characters Nikhil and Bikram are a foil to each other. The former is more passive and softspoken, while the latter is in the path of revolution with his aggressive nationalist fervour. Torn between the two is Nikhil's timid wife Bimala. Nikhil wants her to be empowered and has given her education and music lessons. When she meets Bikram, he charms her with his words of freedom and calling her the queen bee (Mokhi Rani). Bimala enters the outer world with Bikram as she feels he is more of a man than his husband. Nikhil has the purest of intentions but loses his wife's affection for Bikram. Tagore brings out the need for aggression is the only way to establish oneself as a man even to earn respect and love of his own wife. Tagore also shows the rebellious side of Bimala who breaks all the social norms and enters the man's world without the permission of her husband.

"Ginni" is another such story which discusses the inflexibility of gender behaviour and its violent and intolerant attitude towards alternative sexual behaviour. "Ginni" revolves around an introvert boy Ashu, who is bullied by his school teacher. Ashu's only fault was in being caught playing house with his young sister, thus turning into

an object of ridicule for his effeminacy and sexual passiveness.

The teacher, Shibnath master, in his outlook and behaviour, is a rendition of the upper caste Brahmin male, a person socially revered. He gains immense pleasure in taunting the pupils with humiliating nicknames, which in Ashu's case was "Ginni", i.e, the female head of the household. The title took a toll on Ashu's reputation; maiming his masculine identity.

The private space kept exclusive for the female is considered to be inferior to the public space. "Ginni" or the mistress of the house depicts the duty of her gender and also the domestic space where her identity is suppressed in the web of gender roles.

Tagore's "Ginni" portrays his own childhood in the constricted atmosphere in an aristocratic household and the bitter relationships with his tutors. Shibnath master represents the aggressive masculine figure. His character emphasizes the rigid upbringing of children and the misogynistic viewpoint of gender roles. Whereas, Ashu's mannerism is considered to be "un-manly" as the young lad is never seen playing with other boys of his age. The taunt of "Ginni" marks him as a queer. His peers alienate him as the "other". Ashu is guilty of not adhering to the rigid prototype of the masculine identity. His androgynous nature is suppressed and his voice is lost against heterosexual norms.

Tagore's literary work recognizes the ideals of hypermasculinity and effeminacy. He roots for the empowerment and confluence of both genders to dismantle the gender hierarchy. He critiques the Bengali elites or the "bhadralok" who have reconstructed themselves with the British notion of sexuality and revived hypermasculine ethics of aggression. Tagore underlines the fear of emasculation present amongst Bengali elites.

Ashu with his fear of emasculation attempts to conceal his private space to the periphery of non-existence, leading to the erasure of his personality as he "did not want his classmates to think of him as anything more than a schoolboy". Ashu had been caught playing in the porch which is subjected to the public eye. It is a halfway transitory space where one has the choice to himself or camouflage his identity from public scrutiny.

Tagore hailed from a stern Brahmo family which opposed the practices of Vaishnavism. He considered the worship rituals of the cult to be highly aesthetic. Vaishnava worship focusses on the relationship of Radha-Krishna and their eternal cycle of union and separation. The language of praying highlights the yearnings and homoerotic desires to be with God. In the story "Divide", Tagore uses the Vaishnava motifs to give an alternate picture to the hypermasculine notions. Dramatically revolving around the emotional bond between two middle-class Bengali youths-Banamali and Hiamngshu. Banamali's character finds rendition in the role of nurturing maternal figure devoting to the service of Balgopal (infant Krishna).

Vaishnava tradition thematically revolves around gender fluidity. It also uses spatial metaphors of the garden to reminisce the divine union of Radha-Krishna. Tagore uses the Vaishnava allusions to depict the queer space in the devotion of the Vaishnava cult.

As the relationship between the boys' blossom, Banamali finds himself in overt admiration of Himanshu's intellectual fervour. It becomes slightly sexual. The choice of words used in the story is a relic of the erotic unions as cited in the Vaishnava poetry.

The garden is the point of eroticism and the evolution in characters' relationship. When a family feud, sets the two boys apart, Banamali holds on to his belief that nothing can separate him from Himanshu. Soon reality shatters his idealism. This creates the phase of yearning and hopelessness in Banamali. He becomes the symbolic reference of the abandoned lover mourning in separation in accordance with the Vaishnava tradition.

Tagore gives an instance of a homosocial bond and the love embedded in it without any hints of overt sexuality. The erotic allegory of Vaishnavism challenges the heteronormative structures as shown in the character progression of Banamali who begins as a caregiver and ends as a feminine figure mourning in the separation of his lover.

Tagore revives the "Sakhi bhava" as depicted in the friendship between Krishna- Arjun or Krishna-Draupadi bending the binary notions of gender associations. Tagore questions the alienation of the female virtue in masculinity which has been originated from the Hindu conceptual understanding of the gender roles.

Tagore critiques the advent of colonialism to create boundaries between the cultural and the gender spaces in India. Tagore's literary work recognizes the ideals of hypermasculinity and effeminacy. He roots for the empowerment and confluence of both genders to dismantle the gender hierarchy. He critiques the Bengali elites or the "bhadralok" who have reconstructed themselves with the British notion of sexuality and revived hypermasculine ethics of aggression. Tagore underlines the fear of emasculation present amongst Bengali elites.

4. The Indian Lesbian

The "Svairini" in the Kamasutra laid the foundation of "The New Woman". This concept brought in the identity of the lesbian who is sexually overt and derives her pleasure from the other women. The lesbian identity of a woman is considered to be unethical and going against the moral code designed for the sexual behaviour of a woman. The New Woman concept motivated writers such as Ismat Chughtai and Kamala Das to bring forth the identity of the lesbian into the literary narratives.

Ismat Chughtai was one of the controversial figures in the space of queer literature. Her famous work "Lihaaf" or "The Quilt" portrays a lesbian relationship in the arena of Urdu

literature. "Lihaaf" came under the charges of tainting the ethics of Islam with its blasphemous and obscene content. The story is derived from Chughtai's own childhood encounters where she witnessed the incident as a bystander but unable to grasp its meaning. "Lihaaf" shows the erotic relationship of Begum Jaan with her masseuse and hand-maiden Rabbo. Begum Jaan's husband, the Nawab, bears a clean a reputation of fidelity, but he neglects his wife as he is attracted to young men. Begum Jaan does not wait and finds her companionship in Rabbo.

The walls of the female quarter or the "zenana" strip Begum Jaan's ability to express herself, hence, she tries to find liberation of her sexual desires within its walls. Her relationship with Rabbo is witnessed by a teenage girl, whose mother works in the royal household. The girl has been asked to stay in the "zenana" to learn female mannerism and cleanse her tomboy attitudes. The "zenana" is a place to tame her. But instead of learning female virtues, she witnesses the tabooed relationship between the Begum and Rabbo. She does not understand but hears sounds. The images of intimacy continue to stir in her mind.

The "zenana" is a paradoxical symbol in the story. It gives liberation and bondage to the Begum. It strips away one's ability to be in their true nature by taming them to follow the societal norms but also gives the freedom to satiate their inner desires. The "zenana" symbolizes the sanctity of the household and also the women residing in it. The Begum has limited physical contact, with the exception of the Nawab, who never steps inside her harem. The "zenana" and Begum have become abandoned and sterile, which acts as a foil to the primary female virtue of procreation

The Begum battles with conformity and her repressed carnal desires, finally giving into the latter, hence, turning the "zenana" into a queer space. The "quilt" or the "lihaaf" sets the primary undertone of the existence of queer space and activity. Both the "quilt" and "zenana" are the symbol of combatting and confronting the sexual desires. The "lihaaf" becomes the territorial space of the Begum's sexual contentment and outlet of her sexual vexations. The "half" allows the Begum's queer identity to become vocal. It also acts as a visual obstruction for the narrator. The sexual acts are not visually overt, but the narrator could hear sounds similar to he savouring of food. She also noticed Rabbo massaging the Begum's back, an act that soothes her physical needs and mental exhaustion.

The physical needs of the woman are determined by their husbands. What if he fails to satiate them? "Lihaaf" brings out the Begum's homoerotic actions as a result of neglect from her husband. In the prison of the "zenana", she found her freedom to be sexually expressive. Social and religious practices prohibit women to have sexual fantasies of her own. They are supposed to give in to the desires of their spouses in order to be a good wife. "Lihaaf" shatters the notion in the bluntest way.

The identity of Indian lesbian meshes under the weaves of visible roles of a mother, daughter, and wife. Her desires are invisible. The idea of domestic home reconfigures itself as a

space of resistance to the heteronormative sexual ideals. It becomes the closet and its silence and secrecy, the Indian lesbian finds a scope to express herself.

The Indian lesbian does not face invisibility in the literary narratives but erasure, i.e., a forceful marginalization. Historian Geeta Thadani calls this invisibility and erasure as "myths of tolerance". Her statement is strengthened by the former Section 377 of IPC which did not condemn lesbian acts as criminal activity. Thadani opines, "Rendering lesbian sexuality explicit was tantamount to acknowledging it and thereby going against the other punitive strategy of silence and punishments". Lesbian activity, therefore, became a construction of Western influences. The lesbian in India goes against the procreative sexual norms and becomes the sexual subaltern identity. Lesbian literary narratives show instances where the act of lesbianism was considered to be an abomination in pre-colonial cultural practices.

Mira Kumar's "Lesbians in Indian Texts and Contexts" gives a comparative outlook of the lesbian in the dominant texts of the Brahmins who consider it as a transgressive act, whereas, the non-Brahmins gave sanction to the lesbian practices. Kumar critiques the Mahabharata, Ramayan, Arthashastra, and Manusmriti to be repressive weapons to control lesbian desires with harsh punitive measures. Kumar elucidates that in post-Vedic age, the lesbian embodied the moral corruption of the female who had violated the ethics of sexual behaviour.

The silence of lesbian voices and desires stemmed from the private sphere of the family. The family becomes the space to contain and limit lesbian desires by either neglect and often physical assaults. Instances of this familial hostility are also expressed in the heterosexual activities of the female. Social practices such as honour killing is a fine example of such violence. Nevertheless, the Indian lesbian finds the means to survive and reconfigures her spatial ground through camouflage and secrecy. It becomes an instrument of indirect resistance rather than breaking out of the closet.

The lesbian has been treated as the "other" woman by right-wing Indian women. In literary narratives of Kamala Das, the lesbian desires take a confessional mode. Her autobiography- "My Story" is an account of her encounters with lesbian acts in the boarding school as well as her own repressed attraction towards the female sex. Her yearnings to fulfil her sexual desires with the female finds expressions in her short story, "The Sandal Trees". The story is an unsuccessful attempt to revive her sexual affair with an unmarried female doctor who had once nursed her back to health.

Das' poems are unabashed in words regarding the sexual treatment of women at the hands of their spouses. The poems are written in the first-person narrative, reflecting the importance of stories to be told from a first-hand account to retain their authenticity. Kamala Das requests the women to be selfish to fulfil their desires and not wait till the man steps in. Das sparks the protest against male domination and seeks women emancipation from patriarchy. The search for love is

the central theme of her poetry. It is a reflection of her bitter experiences in her own marriage.

The Transgender Narratives

The transgender has the least representation in literary narratives of the sexual subalterns. There are instances, but it gives an inadequate picture of their battles in the mainstream culture. Once revered in the ancient Vedic period as a bringer of good luck, today, their voices are shunned in the marginal corners of literary representation. Most literary texts tend to give a one-sided picture of their story; for instance, the novel "Narcopolis" which revolves around the opium mafia groups in Mumbai shows the transgender character of Dimple as a prostitute working in the opium hubs of the city.

Khushwant Singh was a prolific champion of liberal voices which is reflected in the thematic renditions of sexual freedom in his works. He gives patronage to the subjects that are hidden in the curtains of the society. His novel "Delhi" challenges the heterosexual relationships by showing a love affair of a journalist with a transgender. Singh became a controversial figure who questioned the moral guardians of the society.

Transgender autobiographies are an upcoming genre explored by the transgender activists of India. A Revathy's "The Truth About Me" and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's "Red Lipstick: The Men in my life", are amongst few works which give an explicit window to the struggles of this community. It shows the existential struggle of the people in this community with their gender and body. It vividly shows the struggle of being female in a man's body and the rebuke and insults face in the public sphere.

Subaltern voices of dissent

In the 21st Century, queer identities find a progressive footing in Swapnamoy Chakraborty's "Holdey Golap" (The Yellow Rose) which takes a shift in the paradigms by attempting to break the prejudices against the queer communities. It exposes the exploitation and abuse faced by the alternative identities in the society.

Today, queer literature is growing across the country with authors having independent publishing rights and the authority to create content in social media and digital platforms.

One of the proponents of queer literature, Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla in his work "The Exiles" presents a narrative of a homosexual man's sexual desire fulfilled outside the boundary of his marriage. In regional literary forums, queer identity is taking its course.

The voice of dissent present in queer literature breaks the structural social hegemony. As it disintegrates, the religious and the state's control over sexuality withers away. However, queer literature does not present a ready-made solution to the problems faced by these sexual subalterns but it becomes their space to thrive and celebrate their identities.

Declaration

I solemnly declare that this paper is original and has not been plagiarized

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