

NARRATING INDIAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES THROUGH LITERATURE OF MARGINALIZATION

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Abstract

The gay and lesbian community in India is marginalized to the point of becoming virtually invisible. The discussion of their sexuality is considered as an inappropriate topic for public discussion and debate. Consequently, despite of the significant number of gays and lesbians in the Indian society, their needs and concerns are ignored in the national political arena and in the community planning process. Most gays and lesbians are isolated and often ignorant of the fact that they are not alone. There are few public forums where they can gather to seek support of each other and share their experiences and feelings. However, in the past few decades, many writers have raised several issues related to the gay and lesbian community through their writings. Many such writings have been reflected in Indian literature in the form of novels, short stories, poems, autobiographies and anthologies. These writings have provided visibility to gays and lesbians in India. The present paper focuses on lesbian literary representations in India in light of the emergence of the lesbian as a cultural and political subject. While doing so, an attempt will made to discuss some major Indian women writers and their works in which the issues of lesbians and their marginalization in the Indian society have been brought out.

Key Words: *Lesbian, Feminism, Literature, Marginalization, Women's Experiences, Indian context and culture*

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Introduction: The Lesbian in India

In India, the emergence of a politically and culturally based idea of the term 'lesbian' emerged after the release of the movie *Fire* in 1996, which evoked protests from many Hindu nationalists. They declared lesbianism as a 'western' and merely an 'upper-class' phenomenon. Claiming, as Patel has pointed out that 'lesbians "do not exist in India" and that the lesbian can only represent an 'inauthentic' Indian.' (221-33). The MahilaAghadhi which is the women's wing of the political party Shiv Sena, attacked the movie and saw lesbianism to be a threat to reproduction of the human species. They were of the opinion that if women's sexual desires get fulfilled through lesbian acts then the institution of marriage will collapse. However, the real anxiety and fear that society in general seem to have about lesbianism is that it will remove patriarchal control and seek greater gender parity in the nation, both in terms of women's access to the paid public sphere and the threat to the primacy to male desire. Thus, the role of women is relegated to the domestic sphere, which is also the reproductive sphere, in terms of both, biology as well as ideology.

A group of feminist activist retaliated against this by coining the phrase "Indian and Lesbian" and started a campaign based on the idea that even women who were in same sex relationships had legal rights. The activists' strategies countered the nationalists' charge of cultural inauthenticity by claiming Indian identity, a claim that writings by women complicate.

Ismat Chughtai and Kamla Das: Rebel in a Man's World

In the decades prior to 1998, when lesbians were not visible in the Indian culture, works representing them came from women writers canonized

within postcolonial Indian literary studies under the category of “feminist writers” or “women writers.” The most significant example of this is the Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991), whose short story “*The Quilt*” (1941) is a milestone for understanding female same-sex desire (Chughtai 5-12). “*The Quilt*” became the subject of obscenity charges brought against Chughtai by the colonial British government in power at the time, for its representation of lesbian desire. The story is the account of a young girl who witnesses the lesbian encounter between the rich Begum Jan and her servant woman, Ribbo. The story’s ending, different in different translated versions, has been read by feminist scholars as Chughtai’s quintessential feminist move because it refuses to specularize lesbian desire. The girl narrator’s refusal to tell us what exactly she sees under the lifted quilt of the Begum although she has already told us about the sounds she hears of food being eaten and cat slurping are the manifestation of the same desire of refusal. The reader is in no doubt about what goes on under the quilt, but is never directly told about it. This indirect representation became central in Chughtai’s defense at the trial in which she argued that the story, which is being seen to corrupt the minds of innocent readers, could not possibly be understood by those with no prior knowledge of lesbianism. The story has since become a landmark in postcolonial literary studies.

The Malayalam writer Kamala Das (1934-2009) is the other famous author who represents lesbian desire in her autobiography, *My Story* (1976), and short story “*The Sandal Trees*” (1988) (Das 1-26). Her works have always been studied under the sub category of ‘women’s writing’ as examples of literary discussions of lesbian desire at a time before lesbianism became publicly discussed in India. In her autobiography, Das discusses accounts of female same-sex desire that she witnessed as a girl in a boarding school as well as her own attraction to her female teachers. She also includes a discussion of the intense physical closeness she feels for a female doctor who treated her during an episode of a life-threatening illness. The same episode is the basis for her short story “*The Sandal Trees*.” The story is based on the visit of an unmarried doctor to a married woman, during which both reminisce about their girlhood affair and the doctor attempts to re-ignite it without

success. In this story Das suggests that two women who fall in love with each other are always subjected to rigid cultural conventions that contemplate heterosexuality as the only expression to sexuality. Ruth Vinita's observation (192) that 'the premise of "*The Sandal Trees*" establishes the pattern of girlhood affairs that end with the marriage of one or both protagonists in Indian fiction is apt and interesting.'

The works of canonized writers like Ismat Chughtai and Kamla Das represent lesbian desire through autobiographical fiction. They however, do not name the lesbian in their writings. The works of these writers are available either directly in English or through English translations. Chughtai and Das have become part of the postcolonial canon as a result of the feminist scholarly attention that their works have evoked. However, if they were other writes in the postcolonial periods who wrote the same genre, then historically, their works, experiences and approaches have certainly gone missing.

Lesbianism and Feminism in Indian Literature

Since 1998, a variety of women writers bearing different relationships to the category 'lesbian' started publishing works about lesbian desire. These works were written not only in the form of popular women's writings genre like novel, but also less popular and under-theorized ones such as autobiography and anthology. The trend in lesbian writings seen in the previous decade where lesbian desire is represented but the lesbian is not named continued in the writings of these writers. Other types of works which occur during this period, question the very category of 'lesbian' and further complicate the question of the lesbian identity. This is because these narratives take the shape of desire not just between two (or more) women, but also between transgender men and transgender women. The wide constituency of lesbian critique focuses on the centrality of the feminist vision behind projects seeking sexual liberation, a vision that is often forgotten or marginalized or ignored when lesbianism is imagined as a separate field of critical inquiry. Such a reading implicitly and explicitly addresses the gaps in the theoretical engagements with cultural identity and sexuality of the fields described by

postcolonial studies and Indian sexuality studies.

The terms like 'Women's Writings', 'Feminist Writings' or 'Lesbian Writings' seem to be problematic terms. This is because they are treated as sub-categories and not as central to 'Indian Writings.' These writings are thus read as writings of the 'minority', 'marginalized' or 'special interest' rather than as central to issues of the Indian population. The novels about lesbian desire simply vanish from discussions on global forums such as reader web logs, publishers' publicity forums, or booksellers' advertising or are subsumed under statements that they are about 'female sexuality'.

Autobiography, Anthology and Novel: Popular Genres to express the Lesbian Desire

Lesbian literature not only brings to light genres like autobiography and anthology which are relatively under-theorized or unknown in the canon or novels, which is a better known genre to the masses, but also raises the question of how we determine and ordain the status of (literary) 'writer' upon those who write and whose voices we read. These voices have been facilitated by the historical conditions and feminist activism of the 1990s. Especially, the mobility of feminist scholars and activists between India and the West gave rise to new modes of theorizing, campaigning, and conversing about issues related to women's sexuality. The anthology as a genre of literature acts as a democratic space through its multiple voices. In Sidonie's opinion, the autobiography is that genre which is most associated with individualism (3-43). The novel is the genre that has been a medium of expression of many middle class women.

Suniti Namjoshi's Postmodern Lesbian Autobiography

When one talks about lesbian autobiographies, a special mention should be made of the Indian diaspora writer Suniti Namjoshi, who lives in England. Namjoshi's official autobiography, *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000) is written as a 'coming out' story, dedicated to two dead women, her grandmother and her childhood servant, Goja, to whom the title and bulk of

the autobiography are devoted. It is written as part first-person narrative and part fable. In *Goja*, Namjoshi tells us about leaving India in her mid-twenties to follow "Saheli," her lover, to the U.S. because '[b]y then it was clear that in India it would not be possible for two women, who loved one another, to live honorably together.' (126). But her focus on Goja rather than herself formulates a different kind of lesbian politics. Lesbianism becomes for Namjoshi a way to process the hierarchies established by patriarchal nationalism in India. The self she writes about is lesbian, one situated as an 'outsider' to Indian cultural discourse. Namjoshi's autobiography is a powerful critique on patriarchy. The autobiography is shaped by great attention to what naming herself lesbian has meant, particularly as it has been accompanied by silence in India as long as her grandmother and Goja were alive. It is not surprising that Namjoshi's desire to be identified as a lesbian as well as her literary works have been categorized as 'The Voices of the Marginalized.' In fact as a woman, diasporic and lesbian writer, Namjoshi's autobiography is triply marginalized. Namjoshi's autobiographical project records and writes female sexual subjectivity while paying attention to the disparities in the constitution of cultural subjectivity. Hence, Namjoshi's autobiography proffers a politics that goes well beyond that of exclusive lesbianism alone. As lesbian, as woman, and as diasporic she understands only too well the structures of power. It is precisely because she herself has been marginalized.

Anonymity in the Lesbian Anthology

An anthology is a collection of literary works chosen by the compiler. It may be a collection of poems, short stories, plays, songs, or excerpts. The voices of women in many anthologies are anonymous. A benefit that these anthologies offer is that women can remain unknown, invisible and have the choice of not disclosing their identity. This is mainly because of the fear of the violence that can be inflicted upon them if their identities are revealed. Works such as *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writings from India* edited by Ashwini Sukthankar (1999), *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (2000), Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's edited volume of essays that discuss same-sex desire from ancient, medieval, and contemporary India, and

Vanita's edited volume *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (2002) are examples of lesbian anthologies. Both volumes of Vanita have spawned a number of works that address sexuality as a separate sphere.

Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India, was published by Penguin India, a few months after the Fire controversy. The title itself is very significant as it speaks of the fact that women are now courageous enough to 'face the mirror,' to question themselves and challenge the hypocrisies of life around. Its ninety-nine narratives exist, as editor Ashwini Sukthankar points out, 'in the free confluence of fiction, essay, poetry, and memoir.'(xxi) The narratives are by everyday women as well as established writers whose identities are disguised. As the first and only anthology to date that calls itself "lesbian writing from India," it nevertheless complicates the category 'lesbian' through the voices of multiple contributors, each of whom approaches the definition of lesbian desire and identity differently. The anthology retains the often fragmented, de-contextualized voices of the contributors. It also includes contributions from transgender women and men. The salient feature of this anthology is that it challenges the notion that there are no lesbians in India. An anthology like *Facing the Mirror* stands in sharp contrast to the short story *The Sandalwood Tree*. While in *The Sandalwood Tree*, women are trapped in their marriages and deny the sexual fulfillment that they are seeking, in *Facing the Mirror*, they 'come out' about their sexuality.

The Lesbian Desire: A Comparative Study of the Novels of Manju Kapur and Abha Dawesar

The two realist historical novels, written by middle-class women writers are '*A Married Woman*' (2002), a domestic novel by India-based writer Manju Kapur and '*Babyji*' (2005) written by U.S.-based Indian writer Abha Dawesar. Both these novels are set in New Delhi where the lesbian desire becomes a route to the feminist development of the protagonists. Against the backdrop of caste and religious violence which marked the beginning of the 1990s, the lesbian desire in both these protagonists helps them to find their

own identity as an 'Indian Woman'.

Manju Kapur's *'A Married Woman'* is a novel that begins in the early 1980s and ends in 1992, the year the Babri Masjid was demolished by right-wing Hindu fundamentalists who argued that the site 'rightfully belonged' to the Hindu god Ram. The narrative starts with Astha's property less middle-class parents worrying about her marriage in light of their circumstances. Astha does get married to a rising small-scale industrialist and bears two children. As the novel progresses, we see her go through stages of depression and anxiety over the banality of middle-class married life. She struggles to find "space" for herself in her busy married life. She falls in love with Aijaz Ahmad Khan, a Professor of History and eventually, after his death, she gets involved in a lesbian relationship with his wife Pipeelika. Hemant, Astha's husband is jealous of this friendship as well as Astha's active political involvement. However, she struggles with the implications of her relationship with Pipee as she thinks about her children. In a signal moment, Astha is shown wondering about what life her children would have if their mother left to live with another woman. The relationship ends with Pipee's decision to move to USA, but it proves to be crucial in Astha's understanding of the chasm between political beliefs and the business of everyday living in India.

Dawesar's *'Babyji'* is told from the perspective of Anamika, the sixteen year old protagonist. It focuses on her final year of high school in 1991, which is also the year of the riots following the Mandal Commission's Report which recommended increase in reservation in educational and professional establishments for those disadvantaged by the caste system. This reservation system disadvantaged the upper-castes to secure admissions in government schools and colleges. Anamika herself is a Brahmin and excels in Maths and Physics, making her the bearer of these caste tensions. In the novel, the 'Mandal riots', as they came to be known, come to a head as Anamika becomes embroiled in a very one-sided power-play in same-sex love affairs with three women. The first of these is Tripta Adhikari, whom her parents see as benevolent adult who helps her with homework and whom she meets when Tripta comes to Anamika's school seeking admission for her seven-

year-old son. The second is with Rani, their servant, whose name for her — “Babyji” — represents, as Anamika herself says, ‘such a contradiction in terms, conveying too much respect that the age of a child doesn’t warrant.’ (13) The third is Sheela, an underaged girl in her class. The caste riots outside and the turmoil in her head are co-terminus, and Anamika comes to a painful understanding of the political structure of India through her relationships. The novel ends with Anamika’s rather poignant decision about her future. *Babyji* is the winner of the 2005 Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction and of the 2006 Stonewall Book Award for Fiction.

Unlike Anamika in *Babyji*, lesbian desire is not the central event in Astha’s development, which leads to the question of what exactly that desire does for the protagonist’s development. While Dawesar’s girl protagonist, is in a relationship with a lower-caste woman; Kapur’s married protagonist is in a relationship with the widow of a Muslim activist killed by Hindu fundamentalists. Their desires re-formulate the very terrain of gender because ultimately, even though the relationships end, the girl and the woman step outside the domestic sphere through higher education in the U.S. and a career as painter, respectively. Both the novels offer an alternative to patriarchy and heterosexuality. In *Babyji*, lesbian desire is central to the adolescent Anamika’s development from a patriot who spouts values taught in schoolbooks, television, and film to one who questions the very premises on which nation and national identity are built. Astha, on the other hand, arrives at lesbian desire after a period of politicization in which she progressively begins to question the gender disparities that sustain middle-class life, particularly marriage. Both these novels are retrospective accounts of lesbian desire, discussing it at a time when the lesbian woman was not yet a public figure of identity politics or desire. The novels expose and re-articulate the relationship between desire, gender, and the political realm. Both the writers situate their protagonists’ stories against a socio-cultural context marked by conventions of class, caste, and religion that complicate patriarchal formulations of female identity. They suggest that globalization has effected cultural changes, which enabled the production of the lesbian as a political and cultural subject.

Conclusion

To conclude, the main aim of lesbian literature undeniably is visibility. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code says that same sex love is “unnatural” and therefore punishable. Lesbian literature entirely subverts the idea of this law. Many times women prefer to maintain anonymity when it comes to publishing such works. Robert Griffin assigns to this: ‘works that are simply unsigned, all forms of pseudonymity and fictitious authorship in publications that do not give clues to the empirical author ... works signed with initials’ (877-95). This anonymity offers safety, freedom, private space and an opportunity to explore self to many women whose voices otherwise are unheard. Hence, lesbianism has a more complex view than just visibility. Lesbian literature indicates a degree of homogeneity about women’s lack of awareness of ‘lesbian’ as a term and of lesbian identity politics. Women’s literary culture in global India takes on the task of responding in culturally-specific ways to the question of female same-sex desire in a culture in which all female desire is marked as deviant. Lesbian literature has been neglected for a very long time and the attention that it has attracted is recent. The deferral of the lesbian serves as a mode for engaging in the various other marginalization’s through which culture takes shape. In this sense, women writers who have dealt with the theme of lesbianism in their literary works are doubly marginalized.

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