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“QUEER” QUESTION IN INDIAN LITERARY HISTORY: FROM CONCORD TO DISCORD

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Abstract:

The paper attempts a restructuring of the culture of India from the literary texts which focus on the question of sex, gender, sexuality and alternate sexualities. The paper attempts to employ the tenets of postmodern theories in the Indian literary tradition and try to fathom the various connotations and denotations that have been adduced from the three terms and how the changes incurred have been affected and consequently affect the Indian society and Literature

Keywords: *Queer Theory, LGBTQ, Post Colonialism, Post Modernism, Gender Studies*

Introduction:

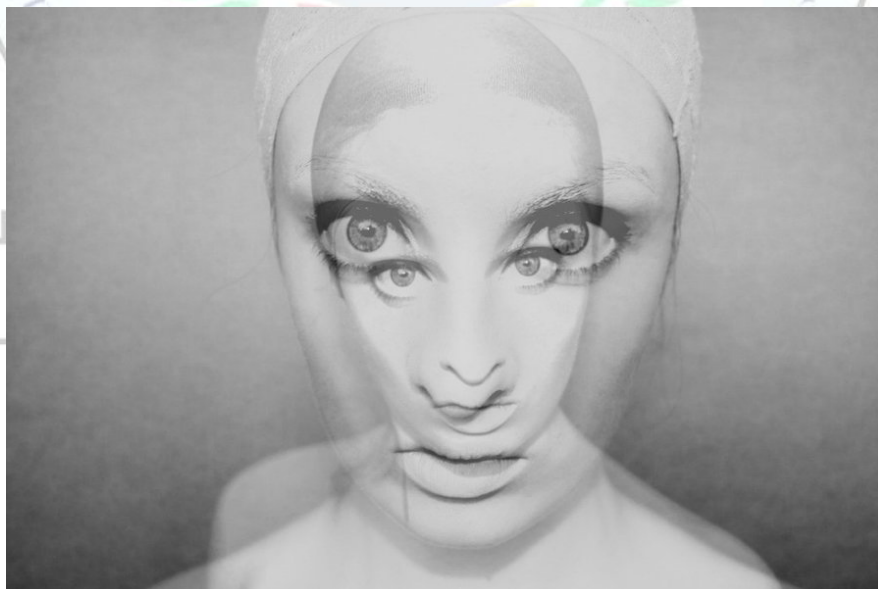


Fig.1. The Postmodern Identity (Stapf, *In Pursuit of Community*)

The image represents the state of an individual's identity, existing in the post modern world, in a nutshell- an identity held together and divided at the same time over and by the very same

factors. The constant lookout for moorings and the inability to find them, the revolutions against the traditional values to create a new world order which keeps slipping out of reach as one is about to plunge and grasp them, the mirage of great pleasures, comfort and happiness keeps the seeker on the move. The question of identity thus becomes the basis for all postmodern debates and literary theories. The post modern theorists are constantly engaged in a battle of ideologies and criticisms so as to trace the cause of this all pervading chaos. One such love-hate triangle involving unending deliberations and discourses is that of sex, sexuality and gender.

However, the situation in present India is mainly imitative or a mirroring of the trajectory the west adopts in relation to such issues while the intellectuals and academicians, in order to gain validation from the west, follow in their footsteps. Incomplete and superficial knowledge about the Indian culture is another deterring factor for the intellectuals who cannot argue with conviction when faced with queries related to their stance on Indian culture. It becomes easier to apply the western theories on the not so western culture and critique it blatantly. In the context of gender studies, it is a similar case as the issues which create queer theories and gives rise to identity crises are not relevant to the Indian context. The paper attempts a restructuring of the culture of India from the literary texts which focus on the question of sex, gender, sexuality and alternate sexualities. The paper attempts to employ the tenets of post modern theories in the Indian literary tradition and try to fathom the various connotations and denotations that have been adduced from the three terms and how the changes incurred have been affected and consequently affect the Indian society and Literature, Socially engendered categories change over time as society changes, and new categories come into being . . . ancient Indian texts constructed more than two gender categories. While the terms 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' come into being in the nineteenth century, attraction, attachment, and sexual interaction between men, between women, and between man and women are as old as all known societies. The terms, tropes and language for understanding these phenomena, cross-sex as much as same-sex, vary widely. (Vanita 28)

'Vikruti evamprakruti' a phrase occurs in Rigveda, the oldest written manuscript of religious acumen in Hinduism, records the aforementioned shloka which means that, "What seems unnatural is also natural", concurred by Bhagavat Gita in the tenth chapter, wherein Lord Krishna conveys to Arjuna, 'I am all there is, was and will be. Hinduism does not dissociate the world and the God. The tritya prakriti, what has now been considered as the Third gender, finds mention in almost all the religious texts, though their treatment and their ontological existence is individual to the thinker's perception. However, they have never been accorded any disparaging or exilic account, for they find their rightful place of existence in the cosmos, all a part of God's grand schemata. The mythological accounts, seeking to impart complex and inarticulate philosophical thoughts, weave yarns of stories which deductively relay the message across. The star cast of these narratives more often than not

includes a queer figure.

In Buddhist and Hindu (and somewhat differently in Jain) traditions, gender itself is questioned. The philosophical basis of this questioning closely resembles the deconstruction of gender in our own times by such thinkers as Monique Whittig and Judith Butler. What these philosophers would call the social construction of gender only appears to be 'natural', ancient Indian philosophers call 'illusion' that only appears to be 'real'. (Vanita 26)

Myths and legends told and retold in the households by the elders of the family leave a profound imprint on the juvenile minds and these impressions of the formative years tend to play a decisive role in the shaping of the cognitive perspective as well as the personality of the benefitted audience. These folklores serve the dual purpose of entertainment and education. In the Indian, especially the Hindu context the heroes of these folklores and mythological yarns are the Gods and the Goddesses. The exhaustive plethoric train of thirty three crore gods and goddesses offers ample scope for various interconnected and holistic network of mythological narrations. Nevertheless, an objective assessment of these tales does not leave room for the marginalisation of any section of society. There is a god or a goddess for each and every group and he or she is connected to all others directly or in some convoluted way. Hence, these myths bind the society into a tightly knit organic whole, and defy the western and post colonial notions of centralized power and the resultant marginalization.

There is a direct connection between the non-reality of gender and the non-absoluteness of heterosexuality. If the two categories, 'man' and 'woman' are not ultimate categories but are merely created by society to foster certain social roles, and to uphold institutions such as marriage, parenthood, and patrilineal inheritance, then the heterosexual relation ceases to be the most important one. If human beings are turned into 'men' and 'women' through such mechanisms as dress, social roles, division of labour, and learned mannerisms, there is no natural or innate reason why an individual should be attracted or attached only to a member of the other gender category. (Vanita 27)

In the wake of the raging debate on Article 377, it becomes all the more relevant to trace the history and the viability of the discourses blared on this issue. Under the Indian Penal Code of Offences causing bodily harm, Article 377 records 'Of Unnatural Offences' that,

Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with [imprisonment for life], or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine. Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section. (Advocate Khoj)

The unnatural offences as defined under this section are namely- sodomy and bestiality. Sodomy refers to the intercourse by a man with a man or with a woman or with an animal. Consent unlike rape disqualifies as a defence argument to the charge. The unnatural offence under English law employs

the term buggery. Homosexual practices with or without consent were illegal and punishable with life or detention. The current Indian law on homosexual/ bisexual relations has been the memorial of British rule in India. Drafted by British under section 377, IPC in the Victorian era 1860, when homosexuality had been demeaned to a psychological and sexual aberration. Other than the penile-vaginal intercourse all sexual coital modes were criminalised. With the landmark judgement delivered by Delhi High Court in 2009, the Indian law took a giant leap away from the colonial hangover left by the British. However, with the Supreme Court ruling over the Delhi High Court verdict and back tracking the law to its transplanted form, the right to freedom was again usurped for the queer population. The year 2014 was an *annus mirabilis* for the transgender community, as they were recognized, formalized and legalized as the Third Gender. This is just flimsy silver lining for the LGBT's, but nonetheless a ray of hope.

Lesbian, gays, bisexual and transgender, collectively referred to as LGBT's explore and their representation in literature is discoursed under the term Queer Theory. The term 'queer' perhaps has its origin from the German 'quer' meaning 'oblique, perverse'. As the Reader's Digest Dictionary of the English Language says of the term, it was first used in the early 20th century for homosexuals. It was originally and usually still is, a deliberately derogatory term when used for homosexual people. In recent years, however, gay people have used it in place of gay or homosexual, in an attempt, by using the word positively, to deprive it of its negative power. The formalised study of non-heterosexual sexualities began with Michael Foucault's *History of Sexuality* wherein he inferred how the societies of the past were more liberated and tolerant of para-heterosexual orientations. This holds absolutely true in the context of the Hindu society and it can be validated by its mythological texts and oratures, prevalent among the common folk.

A.K. Ramanujan in his seminal essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas," delineates the various renderings of Ramayana which alter according to the social milieu. This reflects upon the dynamic nature of any text which may be remotely related to myths, whether written or oral. Especially in the postmodern era, every text is open to multiple readings.

Mahabharata and *Ramayana*, the two most well known texts of Hinduism abound in stories in which queer elements are centralised. Perhaps the most well known of these narratives is the tale of Shikhandi or Shikhandini. Shikhandini was the daughter of King Drupad, the incarnation of Princess Amba born to be the nemesis of Bhishma. However, being born a woman, she was not allowed on the battlefield. Thus, Shikhandini becomes Shikhandi when s/he undergoes a sex change therapy and enters the battlefield as a man. Bhishma, bound by his code of conduct surrenders his weapons, for Shikhandi was born a woman. It is then that Arjun's arrows pierce him and pin him to the ground, where he awaits his death. This tale explicates that the transgenders were not only acknowledged but respected. This anecdote also explicates on the medicinal prowess of those times

when such complex medical transformations as sex change were known and practiced commonly. Shikhandi thus becomes a mythological symbolic entity for transgenders and cross dressers. The decisive role played by him in the Great War for the establishment of *dharma* is an evidence of their inclusion and acceptance in society and participation in events held for its betterment, for a transgender was allowed on the battlefield but not a woman.

Ardha-nareshawar, or what the West refers to as androgyny, is a complementing confluence of the female and the male sexualities, and unlike the western notion, it is not only in the mind but also a physical blend of the binary sexualities. This form of Shiva, wherein the he-she come together as one, is worshipped and revered by the masses. The 'shiva lingam', looked upon as the materialistic symbol of the moment of coitus, is nothing but this blend of male-female as one, for it primarily represents Lord Shiva alone. But all gods have a female counterpart known as their shakti in Tantrik literature, but no goddess has a male form. This is so because the male form represents the mind and the female form symbolises nature. The mind is dependent on nature, whereas nature can exist on its own. Thus Shiva needs the Goddess.

The Gods and Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon are commonly represented as beyond the limitations of defined sexuality and they constantly hop to and fro across these lines of controls. It is decreed that Lord Vishnu being the preserver has to take multifarious forms to dispense his office. Of his nine avatars, one was that of a beautiful woman, Mohini, to save Shiva from Bhasmaasur. After Bhasmasur's self annihilation, Shiva and Mohini come together in conjugal union resulting in the birth of many warriors. This coming together of essentially two male deities, is not deemed unnatural, thereby deeming a male homosexual relationship and its resulting progeny, acceptable and even reverential, as Ayyappa and Aiyanar born of this union are deities worshipped in south. In Hindu philosophy, gender like the body itself, is seen as a garment, a disguise, which is assumed at birth and shed at death; therefore, it conceivably can also be assumed or shed in life by one who is suitably prepared for such changes. Gender is not rigid and unchangeable, nor does it fully determine the self. The self ultimately exceeds gender as well as other categories such as age, caste and class. An enlightened person can realise this in a way that most people cannot. (Vanita 76)

The 'khwajaseras' or as they are commonly called, the 'hijra's' have their deity, Bahuchara Mata, who is revered by them as their patron goddess. This is similar to the veneration of Devi, practiced by the believers of the Shakti cult. Lord Vishnu in his incarnation as Krishna, often cross dresses as 'gopis', thereby transcending the boundaries of gendering and blurring the constraints of propriety. In another avatar as Rama during the 'sata yuga', Lord Vishnu presents another example by including the members of the '*tritya prakriti*' among his subjects. Folklore prevalent among the *hijra* community asserts how the people of their community were assimilated by none other than Lord Rama himself in his 'Ramrajya'. The narrative goes thus that on his return from his exile of

fourteen years, Rama found a group of people awaiting him at the bank of river Saryu. On being interrogated as to why they lingered on the banks in spite of the orders issued by Rama to all the men and women to return to Ayodhya, they responded that as they were neither man nor women, and perforce there were no instructions for them, they were baffled, hence retained their stay. To honour such devotion, Rama took them back to Ayodhya as a part of his own retinue.

The counterpart of Thyrsis in the Hindu mythology is Bhangshvana. As the story goes, during a yagna, an innocent oversight incurred upon him the wrath of Lord Indra. Thereby, Indra cursed him to beget a hundred sons as a mother as he had begot the equal number as a father. Thus turned into a woman he becomes an icon of a bisexual person. The conclusions are quite profound and lead us to question the extent to which our understanding and sensitivities towards anything out of the ordinary have been tampered with. How tolerant are we to what we perceive to be disparate from our practice?

The practice of queer and inter convertible sexualities is not restricted to the Gods and Goddesses alone, and is frequently employed by mere mortals alike. Arjun, the great warrior of *Mahabharata* cross dresses as a eunuch Brihanallah during his exile. The shrines of twin goddesses sprawled across many rural communities, camouflage strong undercurrents of lesbian relationships sacrificed on the altars of propriety by a stringent society. However, their worship as goddesses is no mean testimony to the acceptance of the queer elements, for these goddesses do command a level of adulation and fear, lest they be ignored. The intimacy of Ratnavali and her companion Brahamani is only one of such examples.

There exists an exhaustive tradition of queerness, in covert and overt ways across the entire length and breadth of Hindu mythology, yet they are marginalised and ‘Othered’ in the contemporary society. One of the probable reasons, for this estrangement has been the patriarchal society, which has resisted any attempt, howsoever miniscule to malign it by pollution with feminine association. As the multiple layers of time settled upon the early societies, so the chasm between the queer’s and the ‘straight’s’ deepened, leading to the eruption of antagonistic tendencies among both the factions. The number’s win, hence the queer’s remained either obscured or marginalised largely in post-British colonial history,

Sexual congress in India is primarily a progeny producing process. Any union which does not result in conception of an issue is futile, and a sexual encounter undertaken for pleasure’s sake alone is a sin. As Ruth Vanita says,

Indian culture is heavily child-centered, and the birth of a child makes all well. The ancient texts repeatedly state that the primary purpose of marriage is to produce a child. . . . In this context it makes sense that same sex coupledness should be sanctioned if it can result in offspring. (Vanita 77)

India has always been a country which has accepted and promoted a free discussion of sex

and nurtured other sexualities other than heterosexuality. It has given to the world the encyclopaedia of sexual intercourses- *Kamasutra*. In *Kamasutra* Vatsyana catalogues and assembles together earlier erotic texts. Another noteworthy text of ancient Hindu intellectual tradition discussing and describing various sexual practices is *Jayamangla* by medieval commentator Yashodhara. The tradition is continued through other treatises like 'Kokashasta' and 'Anangranga' which further enumerate and draw upon the earlier texts and interpret them according to the age of their composition thereby providing an insight into the changing sexual patterns. These texts discuss in detail about anal sex '*Purushopasripta*' and oral sex '*Auparashtika*' as a common occurrence between men and women. Yashodhara terms them as '*Sadharana*' (normal and acceptable) which are practiced by the '*Nagarika*'.

The era of medieval Hindu literature comprises of texts that were composed between fourth and fourteenth century. The Puranas (compilation of religious stories) were the dominant genre, which further gave rise to various vernacular renderings in the form of *Katha* literature and devotional poetry. This body of literature is particularly significant to understand the history of sexuality in India as in this period the majority of the work focuses upon the love that exists between the deity and his devotee, thereby forging a relation of same sex love between the two and doing away with homophobia. In most of the cases it is Krishna who is presented as the god while all his male devotees are females. It is said that in Vrindavan, the pilgrim site of the adolescent and loving Krishna, he is the only male, the sole recipient of love. Thus, one of his most staunch devotees, Haridas is considered a reincarnation of one of his consorts Lalita Sakhi. As Ruth Vanita explains:

The seventeenth and eighteenth century 'Vaishnava Sahajiya's' who were influenced by Tantra, interpreted male identification with the woman lover somewhat differently. They saw 'kama' or desire as male and 'prema' or selfless love as female, therefore male devotees identified with Radha's and the other milkmaids love for Krishna. Through highly ritualized sexual intercourse with a woman who was married to another man (as Radha and the milkmaids were married to other men), the male devotee attempted to become a woman and thus purify his love for Krishna. (Vanita 75)

This requires the stepping down of the God from his divine pedestal and behaving with his human worshippers as a mortal would. Often termed as 'Leela' it may be referred as the 'divine play' which is at times replete with 'sexual undertones', for instance the stealing of clothes of the bathing milkmaids by Krishna, transformation of Arjuna into Arjuni to experience Krishna's 'Rasaleela', or 'divine sport'. For this he has to become a female as no male except for Krishna can enter 'Vaikuntha'. Arjuni is gratified by Krishna in more ways than mere seeing. After the sport is concluded Arjun is restored to his male anatomy. This motif of Arjuna being the most beloved of Krishna, more so than his family and consorts, may be interpreted as a God loving his devotee the best, but Arjuna being a constant companion of Krishna to the extent of sleeping in the same quarters

and indulging in sexual congress after cross dressing (as Arjuni) may hint at homosexual relations between the two. However, this is not something that holds any significance because the then society did not perceive such individuals as queer. It was a perfectly acceptable and normative sexual orientation as heterosexuality is today. It is not frowned upon with a pejorative eye; hence the individuals practicing it do not feel uneasy and marginalized under a discriminating gaze. Therefore, no question of an identity crises or criminal consciousness emerges.

The Muslim invasion of India changed the face of the nation in more ways than one. Apart from the different political seals that began to establish the authorities, the co-mingling of the two races and religions gave Indians the exposure to a dynamically different culture. The Muslim conduct is largely governed by the dictates of *Shariah* (the unwritten law of Islam, derived from the pronouncements credited to Prophet Mohammad).

[this law] defines homosexuality as a crime. Several pronouncements about same sex acts are attributed to the Prophet. One of these is; “Doomed by god is he who does what Lot’s people did”. The prophet is also supposed to have said : ‘No man should look at the private parts of other man , and no women should look at the private parts of another women , and no two men sleep [in bed] under one cover, and no two women should sleep under one cover .’ In his last speech to the community, the prophet is said to have said about anal sex: ‘Whoever has intercourse with a women and penetrates her rectum, or with a man, or with a boy, will appear on the last day stinking worse than a corpse; people will find him unbearable until he enters the hell fire and God will cancel all his good deeds.’ (Vanita 128)

However, the catch in this law which actually renders it practically impossible to be effectual is the requirement of four dependable eyewitnesses confirming their presence at the site of penetration for *Shariah*’s law to be implemented. Therefore, homosexual relationships and same sex love is rampant and a covertly established and accepted fact of Muslim history and its representation in Persian and Urdu literary tradition.

The roles of the wife and the lover, irrespective of the sex of the latter, were defined and distinguished. What is also clear is that sexual alterity was not generally considered a form of resistance to social control. In fact, it is debatable whether it was considered an alterity at all. (Vanita 141-2)

Homosexual relations of Muslim rulers with young boys and eunuchs and the upheavals caused due to these inclinations is a well documented fact of Muslim political history. Alauddin Khalji, his son Qutubuddin, Sultan Muhammed bin Tughlaq are but few of the names. Sodomy and pederasty was openly practiced in the Muslim court. The ‘zenana’ had its covert currents of lesbianism and love among women. However, due to the ‘zenana’ being cordoned off from the public eye and its inaccessible stature, such instances can only be deciphered from reading between

the lines of the accounts, poetry and songs sung by the women belonging to that period.

Saleem Kidwai details the social conditions of the period thus:

In this society marriage was considered the legitimate sphere of sexual activity but not necessarily of erotic energies. Homoerotically inclined men could be conveniently accommodated within the framework of heterosexual patriarchy. As long as a man fulfilled his duties as a householder, he was free to seek emotional involvement anywhere he pleased. Romantic attachments outside the family were not only widespread but considered legitimate. Procreation was considered a social duty, but since procreation did not necessitate erotic commitment, erotic commitments were seen as threatening to marriage. This is evident in the conventions prevailing among the heterosexually inclined male elite—they were allowed not only multiple wives and concubines but also liaisons with ever present courtesans. (Vanita 141)

The major practitioners and propagators of this tradition were the 'pir' (the saints) of the Sufi cult. The large scale conversions of the largely Hindu population of India to Islam were largely advanced by Sufism as it shunned dogma and ritualistic religious practices and propagated the sole method of devotion and worship through 'zikr' a mere mention of God's name. Similar to the medieval devotional cult of the Hindu tradition as has been discussed above the Sufi poetry is abounding in homoerotic metaphors and covert-overt expressions of same sex love. The Sufi's had a large number of young followers called the 'murids'. They often composed poetry for the pir which was the expression of their intensive love towards their master, "Many Sufis insisted that only same-gender love could transcend sex and therefore not distract the seeker from his ultimate aim of gnosis. Worldly love (ishq-imajazi) was only a bridge to reach divine love (ishq-ihaiqi), so the loving gaze at the worldly beloved (mashuq) was pure." (Vanita 133) Hazrat Amir Khusro's poetry written for his Auliya, Hazrat Nizamuddin needs no introduction. Amir Khusro's corpus of Hindvi poetry employs I in the female sense, "Beloved, if at night I put my lips to yours, Pretend to be asleep- don't ask whose mouth this is." (Vanita 145)

In the secular literature, poets like Nizamuddin Shah Mubarak 'Abru', Siraj Aurangabadi, Mir Abdul Hai 'Taban': chronicles of Dargah Quli Khan, autobiography of Mir Taqi Mir, offer an exhaustive account of homosexual relations between men or older men and young boys. This bears resemblance to Plato's *Symposium* where pederasty is celebrated. The society does not ostracize or frown upon such relations. In fact the young boys feel elated at discovering themselves the Muses who inspire these poets,

One of the terms used for homoerotically inclined men, amradparast (boy lovers) has been the basis of much misconception. Orientalists as well as modern commentators have sited it to categorize all male-male relationships as age stratified. That same sex relationships involved men of different ages seems to overpower all discussions of medieval same-sex love. Naim discusses the theme of

homosexual love only in the context of pederasty. Rahman insists that the ghazal rests on the assumption that the lover is a man ('mard') whereas the beloved is as a boy ('amrad'). It is true that the beloved is usually young. The fetishising of the youth is common to most cultures, and exaggeration of the beloved's beauty and celebration of youth is a feature of much heterosexual love poetry too. (Vanita 137-138)

Interestingly in the recent years, particularly the past two decades have witnessed a remarkable rise in the instances of queer individuals. Hail the media or the heightened level of awareness of one's rights, there have been mass demonstrations for the protection of the personal rights for those with queer inclinations, and the bottom line is 'We are queer, but we are here'. However, this queerness in itself generates an estrangement, which politicizes the whole notion of one's personal choices. Just like Section 377 which criminalises queer behaviour, the theory forwarded to denote and explicate this kind of disposition, is in itself a foreign imposition which does not sit well with the Indian cultural heritage.

The British Raj took more than the material riches of India, for their real blow were the besmirching of our memories of our glorious past and inducement of the inferiority coma which still keeps us captive in its thralls. We still look towards the west for being the beacon to the resolution of our dilemmas. We would never be successful in justifying the post colonial readings unless we accept and analyze our pre-colonial times of yore. The issue of diverse sexual orientations requires the same compassion and sensitivity in its treatment as was prevalent in the historic past, for then existed unity in diversity in its unadulterated essence as the differences of each individual were respected and accepted, yet no one was excluded or shunned. The same dictum is not true for the contemporary social milieu as now the spirit of rebellion dominates the psychology of the individuals who engage in queer behaviour rather than natural inclination. Hereby, it becomes mandatory to question the attitude of the non-queer population and raise the retrospective question of who and what, essentially is queer? And why this question of queer is here?

Modern Indian Literature contains a plethora of literary pieces and differs from the hitherto discussed body of literature in their exposition of the simmering issue of homophobia in Indian society and the battle of personal versus political which the individuals of the society wage everyday against their families and the society in order to protect their basic right as humans- the right to be able to choose. It is a common occurrence not only in the Indian Writings in English but in the regional literatures as well. It is interesting to note the instances of same sex love among women and homosexuality that is prominently and vividly depicted.

It is in this literature that Foucault's theories of sexuality as elucidated in *History of Sexuality* and Butler's tenets expressed in her *Gender Trouble* find resonance and applicability. It is this social fabric which through its performativity of normativity segregates its subject who dares to weave

against its framework. The literature in this case mirrors a post-colonial society which still retains the deeply ingrained colonial mindset and hence blindly mimes the West, thereby also inheriting the problems and issues of identity crises as faced by west. The time is ripe for scholars, theoreticians and social critiques to take a page or two out of the ancient religions and incorporate them in the present day society, for the problem lies not with an individual's alternative sexual preference but with the society's judgemental attitude of it. Hence, it is important to trace and treat the root cause of the issue of queer theory instead of focussing on the leaves and fruits. The root cause is the society which if sanitized and purged of its prejudices would incorporate, accept and celebrate each and every individual for their unique individuality.

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