

Chapter-4

Indian Queer Theory

To write a conclusion for this dissertation is indeed a difficult task. There are much diversity, many contradictions, much biases working in every facet of homosexuality in India that it is difficult, and at times dangerous to figure out Indian homosexuality as a whole. In India, homosexuality is at once accepted and ignored. First and foremost, the mainstream is still not ready to accept homosexuality as a natural phenomenon of body and mind. As Michel Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*, in the West homosexual behaviour was at once sustained and dominated to emphasize the need for heterosexuality as the most natural and most desired sexual behaviour. Whatever the reason may be, one thing that is certain is that homosexuality was/is visible in the West. Therefore, it was an easy task to theorize homosexuality and start gay rights movements.

In India, Homosexuality is present but not welcomed or visible. However, the behaviour pervades, without an identity and without acceptance. The name, the alternative sexual identity is a foreign import. Thanks to the sweeping generalizations of religious and moral (mostly) Hindu philosophers, homosexuality in India is often presented in the garb of religious mysticism, for example the friendship between Krishna. Such representation of facts helps to shift the focus to different direction, from being a threat to the mainstream, to a more noble and higher human cause. Thus, friendship between Krishna and

Arjuna is revered as the ultimate tool to demolish evil. As Hoshang Merchant writes in his Afterword to *Yaraana* :

It should be obvious ---- that 'gay' in India is not an ethic, not a religion, not a sub-culture, not a profession, not a sub caste. Yet it is all present, all pervasive, ever practised and ever secret. It comes upon you in unexpected places, in unexpected faces. It is shame, guilt, subversion, for some new fangled ones even their honour and pride. Homosexuals are largely unrecognised and blend with the crowd. Hence homosexuality is unspoken about, unaccepted, a danger to the homosexual and the non-homosexual alike. Unlike *hijras* the gays do not have a local habitation or even a name. No word exists yet for the homosexual in any of India's languages. No one in any class wants to own up to it. It is a movement with a thousand colours. Yet it is distasteful to many and many consider it tasteless though it has its very pungent odours and colours. (*Yaarana xx*)

Thus, it took time in India for homosexuality to become visible. In India, homosexual identity emerged at the same time as the gay liberation movements in the West. Therefore, it would be a mistake to study Indian homosexuality or Indian queer writing entirely in the light of The Western Queer Theory. The differences of Indian queer theory owe to our different socio-cultural, political economic and religious background.

In the process of visibility, the first thing that Indian queer theory has had to fight with, is the basic misconception that homosexuality is a western import;

i.e. it does not have any roots in the culture and tradition of India. Apart from the judgemental binaries of good/evil, right/wrong (and so on), the first allegation that Indian homosexuality had to face was sheer dismissal. As pointed out earlier, as a result of the spread of Western education, the talk of homosexuality (including Oscar Wilde) also found its place in the Indian cultural ethos of pre-independence India. But what made things problematic was that these discussions on homosexuality were invariably fused with homophobic elucidations. Thus, in India both the concept of homosexuality and homophobia arrived at the same time, and badly damaged the yet-to-bloom gay identity in the country.

In India, homosexuality was never an identity, which may in time turn into a full-fledged liberation movement. In India, gay identity is scattered among the individuals who desire same-sex love but do not find an outlet to fulfill their desire. Again, such an individual's connectivity to another individual of his kind is very limited. This restricts the possibility of founding a liberation movement, or for that matter building a space to voice out their desires. Though Indian social circumstances offer a fairly accessible space for observing homosocial activities, at the same time restricts the sustenance of same-sex desire. Homosexuality is branded as a perversion and thus stigmatized. This overgeneralization of homophobia are what one can find as the early traces of queer Indian writing

Indian queer theory is split in various individualized ways. These books like Giti Thadani's *Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India* , Ashwini Sukthankar's *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing in India* , and Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*.

The understands same-sex desire in India, from ancient times, and with references from sources like narrative discourse, religious scriptures, fiction and other modes of communication.

Secondly, there are emerging fictional writings on gay experiences, trying to establish the reality of gay life in India. Two important names in this respect include R. Raj Rao. Another milestone in this field is the publication of the collection, *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India* edited by Hoshang Merchant.

Thirdly, there are vast amount of caste and class structures within the gay subculture that not only covers the gay life but the issues related to M.S.M, AIDS, marginalization of women in gay subculture, active/passive dichotomy and *koti/panthi*.

These are some of the complexities that make Indian queer theory at once a difficult, problematic, and multi-linear discourse. One thing is certain that Indian queer theory is essentially related to gay liberation movements, which itself is very limited. In the 1980's, gay liberation movements' sprouted in India, influenced by Western gay liberation, and it was these movements more than any literature and theory that triggered off the campaign against homophobia and heteropatriarchy. It is really at this point of time that India heralded the existence, or rather, coming out, of the most influential gay subculture. In 1990, Ashok Row Kavi published *Bombay Dost*, the first ever exclusively gay magazine in India. It was indeed the springboard, as far as Indian queer theory is concerned.

Contemporary Gay Writings

Though, for the purpose of this research project poems and stories are discussed in the study, the fact remains that they are above all poems and stories are a part of literature without the label of gay or straight. Anyone can enjoy these poems without any short hand label, by virtue of its sheer poetic brilliance. Rakesh Ratti's "Beta" follows a systematic rhyme scheme of ABAB. The poem is divided into four stanzas comprising of four lines each. The poet's use of the image of jewels kept in a box is at once very much in keeping with Indian tradition, and thematically appropriate. It symbolizes longings both of the mother and of the son for wish-fulfillment. The jewel kept in a box also signifies the fact that both the mother's and the son's aspirations would remain unfulfilled; for the son is unable to realize his mother's wish and the mother can never allow her son's desire to be satisfied.

Sultan Padamsee's "Epithalamium" is a small verse play that develops through dialogues between the two characters, Marius and Lenia. S. Anand's "Poems From a Vacation" is a modern poem in both form and content. The poem is split in a schizophrenic way between two parts, Anand speaks and Anand writes. Though apparently contradictory, it leads to a singular conclusion, viz. the poet narrator's inner anxiety and his inability to come in terms with his immediate reality. What makes the study of these poems complicated and what forms the basic crux of this project is that all the works discussed are part of an anthology which itself claims to be a collection of gay writings from India. The book *Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia*, edited by Hoshang Merchant claims to be the first anthology of its kind published in India. Though in the west anthologies

like these are numerous, in India this is a first attempt at collecting gay writing in a single volume. This is a path-breaking venture much like Ashwini Suktankar's *Facing the Mirror*. While the latter is a collection of personal narratives by women who identify themselves as lesbians, *Yaraana* is purely a literary venture. The pieces collected here are mostly published work, which have already created a stir. Mahesh Dattani's "Night Queen" has already won admirations from readers and audiences alike. R. Raj Rao's poems are published in various journals, and so on. Coming under the umbrella of a single volume, these poems now acquire a new lease to life.

After being included in a specialized anthology of Indian gay writings, these works also acquire a limited but focused point of view. Irrespective of their theme and content, the main theme of all these poems is the reality of gay experience in India. This conclusion makes the study of these poems at once easy and difficult. Easy, because now we can classify them under the generic theme of gay life in India and discuss each individual poem as such. Difficult, because while doing so, the individual poems tend to lose their personal flavour, which forms the crux of their art.

The thin line between art and propaganda ceases to exist here. By attaching the label of gay writing to these poems the perspective becomes even narrower. Now, we study these poems as an example of how the particular poet has depicted his experience of being gay in India. We tend to use the poetic persona to consider the suffering and oppression homosexuals face in India. And again, we tend to discuss the poems as a charter or a plea for change. This

particularly happens in the case of poems like R. Raj Rao's "Underground", Sultan Padamsee's "O Pomponia Mine!" and Rakesh Ratti's "Beta". This of course is a gross generalisation. It may be fruitful to begin with it, but it may cause us to ignore the individual identities of the poems.

What I am trying to justify here is that the poems I have discussed in the course of my study are poems in their own right and not propaganda. The theme of homosexuality in these poems is second to their poetic brilliance. Sultan Padamsee's "Epithalamium" is a heart rendering expression of an individual's experience of the religio-mythical, signified here by the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The theme and content of each poem I have discussed is diverse and varied. While R. Raj Rao's "Underground" is a poem with a political undertone, his vision is essentially satirical.

To conclude, I would like to add that these poems should be read as poems first and gay poems later. Their being gay poems does not essentially mar their poetic achievement, and these poems can stand in their own right, without the tag of 'gay poetry' being attached to them. All these poems are written from the point of view of a man who identifies himself as gay, and speaks about his being gay within Indian context. All the poems I have discussed here have two very distinct features. Firstly, the poetic persona of each poem I have discussed (except for Marius in Sultan Padamsee's "Epithalamium") is a man who is certain about his sexual instinct and his sexual preference. He is gay and he knows it too well. There is no inner struggle in the poetic persona about his sexual orientation (as in the case of Ash in Mahesh Dattani's play "Night Queen"). This brings me to the

second distinctive feature of this study. After identifying oneself as gay and coming to terms with it, the next step is to come to terms with society. This conflict between private desire and public duty is the crux on which all the poems are based. The difference here is in degree not in kind. At the extreme pole stands R. Raj Rao's "Underground". It portrays the mainstream idea of homosexuality, as well as the homosexual world of the underground. It begins with dreams of a gay utopia and ends with the very personal defeat of an individual who fails to fulfil his desire even underground. On the opposite side, stands Sultan Padamsee's "O Pomponia Mine!" which deals with an individual's way of handling both society's attitude and his own desire in a more placid manner than R. Raj Rao's violent "Underground".

We can sincerely hope that a time will come when every gay poet would be able to break from the clutches of homophobia, and start living in the world with the same pride that a heterosexual does. I also hope that there would be studies of same sex love undertaken with same opulence that one finds in case of heterosexual love.

Works Cited

Merchant, Hoshang. *Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999. Print.