Women in love:
A Study of the Representation of Lesbianism in Indian Literature

Dissertation submitted to
Jawaharlal Nehru University
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Master of Philosophy

by

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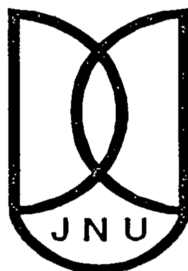

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Certificate

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Declaration by the Candidate

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The literary representation of lesbianism in India constitutes the 'lesbian' as a product of culture and politics. The lesbian is not seen as a 'naturalised' and 'organic' being like the heterosexual individual; rather her very existence does not get accepted without a protest. How does this figure manifest herself in fiction in English in India? Is she named? Is she an occluded, shadowy figure like the one in the heterosexual imagination? Is she a figure of spectacle in the visual media like that of television and cinema? Or is she configured differently? These are some of the questions I take up in this dissertation. The purpose is to be able to explore whether a particular kind of Indian/South Asian queer subjectivity emerges from this fiction that offers flesh and blood to the figure of the 'queer' that does the rounds in Indian culture today and to offer, if possible, this figure as the subject of same-sex politics in contemporary India. It was with the release of Deepa Mehta's film on lesbians called *Fire* in 1996 that the representation of the lesbian community as important political and cultural subjects attracted public attention. It was the first film of its kind in the country and led to a hostile response from the Hindu Right after its release, especially in Delhi and Mumbai. The right-wing nationalists considered it to be a contradiction to the traditional representation of Indian womanhood (the main characters were called Radha and Sita) and a total corruption of Indian mores by the West. They argued against such a depiction by emphasising Mehta's diasporic status and the funding of the film by various foreign companies. Lesbianism was declared 'western', 'urban' and 'an upper class' phenomenon in India. These bearers of India's 'moral conscience' went on to declare that lesbians did not actually 'exist in India' and a lesbian was almost stripped of her status of being a woman in such a society.[1] Such rigid and false declarations were accompanied by intense

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[1] Almost all the critics who have written about the incident mention these comments by the nationalists. Madhu Kishwar, "Naïve Outpourings of a Self-Hating Indian: Deepa Mehta's *Fire*," *Manushi: A Journal about Women and Society* 109 (November-December, 1998): 2-14, Ratna Kapur, "Too Hot to Handle: Cultural Politics Of 'Fire.'" *Feminist Review* 64 (Spring 2000): 53-64; Gayathri Gopinath, "On Fire," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4.4 (Fall 1998): 631-636, Mary E John and Tejaswini Niranjana, "Mirror Politics: 'Fire', Hindutva and Indian Culture," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34.10/11 (March. 6-19, 1999): 581-584, have pointed out at these remarks made by the right wing members of the Shiv Sainiks and Mahila Aghadi groups. Also Carol Upadhya's piece, "Set This House on Fire." *Economic and Political Weekly* (December 12, 1998): 3176-3177, is a response to John and Niranjana's article.

physical violence where the theatres screening the film were damaged. Both the director and the actresses of *Fire* were reported to have received a number of death threats as well as faced severe charges of displaying obscenity and vulgarity.

Brinda Bose argues that the notions of obscenity, indecency and morality become actively functional with respect to women in the Indian context almost claiming that any sexual representation in connection to women has to be obscene. Therefore, "true Indian respect for women"[2] can be achieved by nullifying them as sexual beings, which of course defies any rational sense of existence. However, the formation of CALERI (Campaign for Lesbian Rights) in 1998, an autonomous group of lesbians, gays and bisexuals based in Delhi, after the *Fire* incident and in response to it, led to a new phase in LGBT activism in India. CALERI organized a public rally to protest against the brutal ways of the right wing Hindu forces and, more importantly, to assert Indian lesbian identity. The protest was also to confirm the rights to freedom of artistic expression, as in the case of Deepa Mehta and her film. They also brought out a report on lesbian identity in India and used the metaphor of the Emergency in their title.[3]

However, in *Fire* and in another mainstream Bollywood film that followed[4], the treatment of lesbian relationships within the cinematic experience has been victim to several socio-political and moral belief systems. The popular reasons provided for such unsympathetic treatment of the figure of the lesbian is the very concept of the division of labour in the Indian family structure. While men are the active members working outside the domain of home for livelihood, the womenfolk are the managers of household restricted by the institution of marriage (monogamy, to be precise) and motherhood. A woman becomes subordinate to the male counterpart and a sexually active one becomes the object of criticism. Therefore, a lesbian becomes a sort of

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[2] Bose, Brinda. Introduction. *Translating Desire: The Politics of Gender and Culture in India.* Ed. Brinda Bose. New Delhi: Katha, 2002. xiii. Print.

[3] Campaign for Lesbian rights. A Citizen's Report. *Khamosh! Emergency Jari Hai*: *Lesbian Emergence*. New Delhi: CALERI, 1999. Print. The report considered the trope of Indira Gandhi's Emergency imposed in 1975 as a tool to describe the status of alternate or non-heterosexual identities in India. Similar to the days of Emergency, when Maharashtra had passed a bill that made sterilization mandatory for one of the partners of every couple having three or more children in order to curb procreation, the implementation of Section 377 of IPC had called for a rigid state control over the activities of the people of non- heterosexual communities. This state of Emergency, they said, was way prolonged and not over in India even when it had become dysfunctional in the actual place of its origin.

[4] A mainstream Hindi film called *Girlfriend* was released in 2004, directed by Karan Razdan that represented the lesbian character as a psychically damaged man-hater who turns violent on discovering the love interest of the female friend she is in love with.

'deviant' to such a constitution of affairs where she cannot be limited within a monogamous, heterosexual relationship, marriage and procreation.

Jeffrey Weeks distinguishes between gender and sexuality as he asserts the inseparable connection between the two. Further, he traces the historical cultural registers that have considered female sexuality and female sexual demands as problematic. But the nineteenth century is responsible for constructing a passive view of female sexuality that treats it as being dominated by and dependent upon patriarchy. Lesbianism is an exception to this state of constitution and stands as a threat to the patriarchal forces.[5] He says that lesbianism has been particularly problematic since it has been "an autonomously female sexuality in which men played no part." (Weeks 47).

With respect to identity formation, gender or sexual orientation become important factors for consideration but often fall into the old dichotomy of the essentialist-constructionist debate. While the essentialists believe in the 'natural' and biological determination of an individual's sexuality, the social constructionists discard this approach and establish sexuality as a cultural construct based on social factors. The essentialists consider the sameness of characters over a period of time while the constructionists emphasize upon differences.[6] Some believe that the debate between those who emphasize the recent appearance of the homosexuals as a distinct type of person and those who believe in an intrinsic homosexual self is a fruitless one, reiterating the old nature versus nurture (essentialist/constructionist) question. Others think the debate between the social constructionists and essentialists can be transcended.

Theorists like Michel Foucault have historicised sexuality and shown how it is historically and culturally produced. David Halperin in his *How to do the History of Homosexuality*[7] offers a very nuanced account of historicism and its use in the writing of the history of sexuality. Carefully tracing the essentialist vs. constructionist debate and showing the insightful way in which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick sidesteps this debate in her pioneering work, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Halperin shows how Sedgwick's positing of the homosexual as a site of contradiction is not enough. One still has to historicise how that contradiction produces different kinds of sexual

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[5] Weeks, Jeffrey. *Sexuality*. London: Routledge, 1986. Print.
[6] Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1989. Print.
[7] Halperin, David. *How to do the History of Homosexuality*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002. Print.

subjects, or even conceptions of the sexual, at different historical moments. Using Foucault's genealogical method, he shows how one actually goes about excavating the historical as well as the present forms of sexuality, sexual behavior and sexual identity, none of which are mutually exclusive. This kind of sophisticated work is somehow absent in Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's project that does not contain adequate references to these debates in the writing of gay and lesbian history over decades now.

Butler's notion of 'gender performance' as per the social constructionist position becomes a crucial tool of analysis in the dissertation, since the experiences that women undergo and their very expression is highly dependent upon the historical and social settings in which they are located.[8] Therefore, the construction of women's body and sexuality are associated to the notions of various political, religious and legal events. The Indian context comes into play when such registers are dealt with because it is within the framework of the Indian culture that this dissertation is attempting to provide a prime position of study to the lesbian subject. In other words, what the dissertation will then try to do is to map out a kind of Indian same-sex women/lesbian queerness.

Talking about 'queer,' it becomes important to trace the trajectory of this word. Generally, it means strange or unusual but has been used as an acronym for homosexuals. The emergence of the word 'queer' can be credited to the context of the gays in US during 1990s. An organization called Queer Nation was responsible for bringing in this term in the arena of campaigning and activism for the LGBT community in New York. The members of the organization were weary of the discrimination that was made towards HIV/AIDS affected individuals and the never-ending neglect by the heterosexual forces that constituted the mainstream and the neoliberal US state. The term 'queer' attained quick popularity not just in the media culture but in the academia too. Therefore it became a term of freedom and empowerment for the LGBT community especially those of colour in the US at that time.

Owing to the diversified domain of Indian context, no subjectivity can be depicted on its own. It would invariably be an accumulation of the variety of discourses available. What is unique about a 'queer' identity is that it accommodates this conflicting plurality within itself. As Arvind

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[8] Butler has considerably revised her position in her later works after *Gender Trouble*(1990).

Narrain and Gautam Bhan remark in *Because I have a Voice: Queer Politics in India,*[9] one of the earliest anthologies on the queer movement in India:

> The term 'queer' is, in some ways, both a deeply personal identity and a defiant political perspective. It embodies within itself a rejection of the primacy of the heterosexual, patriarchal family as the cornerstone of our society. In doing so, it rejects the assumption of compulsory heterosexuality - society's firm yet unsaid belief that the world around (and everyone in it) is heterosexual until proven otherwise. It captures and validates the identities and desires of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, but also represents for many, an understanding of sexuality that goes beyond the categories of 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual'. (Narrain and Bhan 3-4).

Therefore, it also becomes quite clear how difficult it is to consider a single definition for the range of queer experiences. Any definition in that sense then limits the gamut of multiplicities that might be significant to the queer identity. Hence, if 'queer' has to work, then it has to show in practice as well. They also comment upon the tendency of queer getting pushed towards the peripheral boundaries of the society and say in their defense that:

> Queer politics does not speak only of the issues of these communities as 'minority issues', but instead it speaks of larger understandings of gender and sexuality in our society that affect us all, regardless of our sexual orientation. It speaks of sexuality as a politics intrinsically and inevitably connected to the politics of class, gender, caste, religion and so on, thereby both acknowledging other movements and also demanding inclusion within them. (Narrain and Bhan 4).

Ashley Tellis in his essay, "Rethinking the 'Queer Movement' in Contemporary India"[10] presents a critique of the above mentioned analysis of the term 'queer'. According to him, Narrain and Bhan remain rather "ahistorical in the appropriation of the term and utopian in their impulse." He argues that a concrete engagement with other identities beyond the 'homosexual and heterosexual' should be charted out for an activist movement rather than just making claims. Moreover, the primary motives of the movement claims to "visibilise and counter the violence faced by queer people on a daily basis", "challenge the idea of a 'normal' and 'different'

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[9] Narrain, Arvind and Gautam Bhan. Introduction. *Because I have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*. Eds. Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan. New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005. Print.

[10] Tellis, Ashley. "Rethinking the 'Queer Movement' in Contemporary India" in Jai Sen and Peter Waterman *The Movement of Movements* in the Challenging Empire Series (Forthcoming 2012).

sexuality in itself", "object to all hierarchies and power structures", "intersections" with "feminist movements and other movements at the margins" (Narrain and Bhan 6), all of which seem to remain in theory but are absent in the domain of practice. Tellis also emphasizes on the 'NGOisation of activist politics' in the context of the queer movement which is generally the concern of the middle or upper middle class individuals. There is then a tendency of a certain elitism that involves class, caste and other discourses that tend to erase precisely the other axes of the queer community that it claims to be engaging with.

Nevertheless, I use the term queer as not only the best term we have but also to try and illustrate that the best of the fiction I speak about actually demonstrates an awareness of the multiple axes of disenfranchisement that constitute the utopian and politically progressive conception of the word queer.

The first chapter constitutes a theoretical framework of the domain of lesbian love and identity in India, the basis being Butler's argument on gender performativity. It traces the historical movements and activities that has led to the contemporary state of lesbianism both in the West and in the Indian contexts. Feminism and lesbianism have shared a close association in terms of dealing with concerns of women in the past. Though they later parted ways since the lesbians felt that their concerns were neglected by the predominantly heterosexist nature of the women's movement in the West, still feminism is considered to be the source of all lesbian movements in the West or at any rate both closely associated with each other. This, I go on to demonstrate, is not the case with the lesbian movement and the women's movement in India. By presenting a comparative study of the various debates regarding the lesbian movements both in the subcontinent and the West, one gets a glimpse of the lack of development in this area in India owing to the prevalent sense of homophobia and heterosexism in the women's movement in India.

The second chapter deals with the detailed analysis of the queer narrative called "The Complete Works of Someshwar.P Balendu" by Qamar Roshanabadi in the pioneering lesbian anthology edited by Ashwini Sukthankar, *Facing The Mirror*. It is a story that imbibes the various threads of socio-cultural and religious politics that comprise a typical individual's life in the middle class Indian household and spins them out of orbit and control because its central protagonist is anything but typical. It goes on to reiterate how the life of a social organism is tied with the

intricacies of its surroundings and yet how a queer person can read them differently. An engagement with the narrative gives a unique sense of the queer life of the protagonist who deals with the ostracisation from the society as well as finds true friends amongst another queer community, that of the eunuchs. The social disparity between a butch lesbian and a hijra and the personal bond between them throws open a number of questions on the plural nature of 'queer'.

The third chapter looks into three short stories by Parvati Sharma, a young queer writer from Delhi. Her central characters are lesbian couples but nowhere have they been named as such. Therefore, they are not the victims of the usual aggressive attitude from the straight community. Although they seem unreal in comparison to the conditions of the gay community in the 'real' Indian society, the politics of the country, its religious turmoils, and issues of class and caste do creep in. Her stories are a mix of magic realism and subtle explorations of psychic space that create a very vivid picture of 'queer'. The psychic and the bodily energies find equal expression in quite a graphic way. All three narratives facilitate the construction of an Indian queer subjectivity which is multifarious and versatile.

Therefore, the dissertation will focus on women's lives in general and particularly as depicted in the above cited pieces of fiction. Their relationships with one another and negotiations with the world around is the main agenda of concern. In the due course of analysis, a trajectory of the Indian lesbian queerness is what the dissertation intends to chart.

Chapter 2

Theorising same-sex desire between women

The issue of identity has acquired great importance in today's world. Identity is about belonging, about what one has in common and what differentiates one from others and, in liberal democracies, often offers one benefits or a certain status based on the historical marginalisation of one's group or identity. It provides the individual with a sense of personal location, the very basis of one's complex involvement with others. We are the product of multiple and, at times, potentially contradictory identities whose acceptance is dependent on certain temporal and social factors. Within a social system, the construction of identity also becomes a process of ascribing authority or power to certain positions in comparison to others. Gender, sex and sexuality have recently become some of the significant factors of consideration in the formation of certain kind of identity in the modern world.

Feminist theorist Judith Butler in, *Gender Trouble,*[11]considers this idea of identity as "free floating" (24) and a result of "repetitive stylised acts as in a performance." (139). Therefore, to her, our identities do not express any authentic inner self. Rather, they are the dramatic effects of certain performances. This has been one of the key ideas behind what has come to be called 'queer theory' where identity is seen as something that is 'without essence'. Though Butler was one of the first people to use it in the academy, the term 'queer' actually originated on the streets of New York in the 1990s by an activist group called Queer Nation. The group members were activists from ACT UP who intended to voice out their discontent towards the discrimination done to people with HIV/AIDS as well as the general restrictions that the heteronormative U.S society had put on the non-heterosexual population.

The implication of Butler's argument is that the boundaries of identity are seen as potentially reinventable by the one who possesses it. She further argues that there are possibilities for a person to form and choose one's own individual identity.[12] She argues that sex precedes gender, which in turn causes desire. So both gender and desire are flexible enough to function as per

[11] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity.* New York and London: Routledge, 1990. Print.

[12] Butler has considerably revised this position in her subsequent work and made it more grounded in the psyche.

individual choice and not dependent upon sex. She also suggests that certain gender configurations have acquired a hegemonic position in comparison to the others and are regarded as more 'natural.' Her argument builds on feminist insights that question whether gender is natural or something that is acquired and grafts this on to the homosexuality question.

In this dissertation, I examine texts in English that deal with same-sex desire between women in the Indian context using the insights of theorists like Butler.[13] This is both a convenient and difficult thing to do. It is convenient because it bypasses the whole question of identity politics as well as the difficulties Indian same-sex desiring women have had with feminism and identity politics (something I discuss later in this chapter). It is difficult because it is not as if these women identify as 'queer' either and it seems historically anachronistic to take a movement that has gone through several stages and graft it on to a context where there has been no real same-sex movement at all.[14] The challenge then is to be historically specific to the contexts of the texts I examine.

Same-sex love, especially among women in India, is an under-researched domain. It has been seen by right wing forces as a western import since Indian culture is considered to be rather shame-oriented. Various Indian classical texts like the Shastras and Upanishads are celebrated as some of the earliest repositories of knowledge on sexual behaviour and patterns worldwide. Same-sex love has also found mention in these scriptures but in the due course of time, same-sex activists and writers in the subcontinent have ironically enough, have drawn on western frameworks and ideas to theorise the domain of gay and lesbian love (the main texts of which I

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[13] However, there are certain texts that do not lie within the scope of my analysis. I do not include the stories written in various Indian languages since they exist beyond the zone of my expertise in the very languages. Other texts like those written by Suniti Namjoshi, *Babyji* (2005)- a novel by Abha Dawesar, *Desilicious* (2011) – a compilation edited by Masala Trois Collective, films like- *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta, *Sancharram* (2004) by Ligy Pullapally are also not included owing to the diasporic connections of the authors and directors. Further, some texts in popular culture, like- Shobha De's *Strange Obsession* (1992) and Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002) who sensationalise and typically represent voyeuristic caricatures of the lesbian characters, which almost categorize these texts as pornography, do not fit into the curriculum of the project.

[14] Sircar, Oishik. "Questioning 'queer'."*Agenda* 4 (2006): 30-32. Print. He talks about how the term encompasses all kinds of non-heteronormative sexualities that tend to include gays, lesbians, transsexuals, bisexuals, a recent addition being the hijras and kothis which constitutes the group, LGBTHK. Though the agenda of being 'queer' is the celebration of differences and multiplicity, Sircar observes how difficult it has become to accommodate further pluralities with due course of time. So in a way then 'queer' itself is becoming a concrete category or identity that has its own criterion and seeks for a tendency to 'fit in'. The essayist cites examples of experiences that do not fit into the LGBTHK regime thus further complicating the notion of 'queer'.

discuss later in this chapter) which has also been mocked by the media in the form of stories of spectacular prurience.[15]

THE WESTERN CONTEXT

The use of 'lesbianism' as a term for sexual love between women dates back in the West to at least to 1870. Before that the word simply meant 'of or belonging to Lesbos,' an island situated in the northern part of the Grecian archipelago. The natives of Lesbos were perceived to be passionate and intensely sensual people with a great love of nature and physical beauty. Another term, 'Sapphism' derived from Sappho, an ancient Greek poet who has been regarded as the Tenth Muse by Plato. She wrote love poems addressed both to men and women and hence has been considered a pioneer of same-sex desire in women. It has been known from the historical records of ancient Greece that numerous forms of institutionalised pederasty were very much prevalent in their lives. The time period further proves the existence of such phenomena though historians like David Halperin have asked us to look at such evidence in its historical context and not through modern identitarian lenses.[16] In the modern context, feminism has been considered as the source of lesbian movements, that emphasize on an association between the two movements dating back to approximately 1890s. Feminists brought about awareness of the condition of women and also associated with each other in new ways in the modern world. Women came together in small groups and shared their personal experiences with each other and realised that their individual experiences were not really unique. Rather they were widely shared by many women. By the 1960s after the period of suffragism, this became a proper movement in

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[15] There have been numerous reports in the newspapers that tend to make fun of women marrying each other. An article in *The Tribune*, Chandigarh dated 21st July, 1993, titled "Woman weds 'woman'", reported the marriage between Neeru alias Dinesh Sharma and Meenu Sharma. The marriage took place in a temple in the presence of their respective friends, but it had shocked the locality. Neeru preferred to be called Dinesh Sharma and had been wearing masculine attire since childhood, took up the position of the husband in this marriage.

Similarly, an article in *The Week* dated 20th May, 2001 titled "Woman and wife", reported the tying of knot between a nurse, Tanuja Chauhan and her lover Jaya Verma at Ambikapur. Both of them have claimed to dislike men since childhood owing to various traumatic experiences. They had applied for a marriage registration but it was denied under the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 that completely negates homesexual or lesbian marriages.

In addition to the journalistic writings, there is a body of writing on lesbian desires by straight writers like Shobha De, Manju Kapur, Khushwant Singh, Amruta Patil, –all of whom have tried to negotiate with same-sex love between women as a cool topic to milk for sales value.

[16] Halperin, David.M. *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love*. New York and London: Routledge, 1990. Print.

the Western world. Women proclaimed that "the personal is political"[17] and that all women are 'sisters', based on their commonly shared experiences. They believed that sexism is the most widespread of all human oppression.

Feminism made a determined effort to destroy the sex/gender system and supported an existence of pure equality. Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics*, speculated that androgyny was the most suitable condition of being. She emphasised on a "sexual revolution"[18] caused by the integration of the separate masculine and feminine subcultures followed by a systematic evaluation that would lead to the destruction of the rigid sex/gender system established by patriarchy. Others like Shulamith Firestone, Mary Daly and Gayle Rubin joined in with similar kind of views that over all led towards the conception of a lesbian universe free from men.

Feminism can be broadly considered to be a sense of awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in the society, whether at work or within the family. There is a conscious action taken on the part of various women and men to change such a situation. But lesbian feminism emerged in the late 1970s especially in the United States and Europe, out of a discontent with the Second Wave feminism and the gay liberation movement, both of which were accused of sexism and the marginalising of same-sex desire between women. While First Wave feminism focused on the voting and property rights of women, the Second Wave addressed issues dealing with reproductive rights and sexuality. Lesbians were very much a part of the women's movement but they felt that their issues had not been paid equal heed to so far. Therefore, lesbian feminism took a separatist stand and argued for a world exclusively of and for women. It posed challenges to heterosexuality and wanted to establish lesbianism as a form of resistance to the various institutions like patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism.

The foundation of the lesbian feminist movement took place in May, 1970, when a group of activists called the Radicalesbians, headed by lesbian novelist Rita Mae Brown, interrupted a women's conference in New York City and demanded the reading of an essay called "The Woman-Identified Woman." This essay has been considered to be the first major manifesto by the lesbians that claimed to assign a central position to them in the feminist movement. Further,

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[17] The phrase is taken from an article by the same title by Carol Hanisch in 1969, originally published in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's liberation*. It went on to become one of the major agendas of the second wave feminism supported by Betty Friedan.

[18] Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. New York: University of Illinois Press, 2000. 62. Print.

it validated a connection between various women which was independent of male approval and institutions because they believed that sexual oppression of women was one of the reasons behind the existence of the category of lesbians. The concept of sexual identity was undermined. Basically, the essay launched the significance of sexuality in feminist theory and practice, though it was highly criticised and called the 'Lavender Menace' against the women's movement by feminists like Betty Friedan and many others.

Lesbian feminism was a political and cultural movement and had two major strands of thought. Some emphasised upon lesbianism as a political choice and discussed the sexual closeness between women. Anne Koedt's "The Myth Of The Vaginal Orgasm,"[19] a political analysis of vaginal versus clitoral orgasms urged lesbians to at least refrain from vaginal penetration or any other similar "male-stream acts." They also disapproved of butch-femme relationships since they tend to imitate the heterosexual paradigm of the active male and passive female roles. In due course of time, the sexual component of lesbianism became less relevant. Charlotte Bunch's article "Lesbian in Revolt"[20] in 1972 set out to establish lesbian feminism as the basis for the liberation of all women. She argued that "lesbianism threatens male supremacy at its core, not because women were having sex together, but because they withdrew their energies from men."

The second strain of the movement followed a more cultural dimension. By fully identifying with women, these women believed one would bring about an end to all kinds of patriarchal oppression. This claim was mainly theorised on the basis of women's assumed biological capacity to bear children. Adrienne Rich, the Jewish-American feminist poet and essayist in her article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence"[21] in 1980 talks of the "lesbian continuum" that is essentially shared amongst women where they find strength, solidarity and personal fulfillment from each other. The concept totally negates a male presence. It also seemed to convey that all women who had intimate emotional relationships with each other could be considered "lesbian." Genital experience may or may not be a part of the lesbian relationship. Her project surely had a political agenda as she attempts to assert a lesbian subjectivity and to

[19] Anne Koedt was one of the founder members of the radical feminist movement in New York. This article first appeared in *Notes From the First Year* in June 1968. The article was actually presented as a paper at the first national women's liberation conference in Chicago and then printed in *Notes From the Second Year* in 1970. Since then, it has been reprinted many times with the permission of the author.

[20] "Lesbians in Revolt", first appeared in *The Furies*, vol.1, no.1 in January 1972.

[21] The article first appeared in the book called *Blood, Bread and Poetry* published in 1986 by the author.

constitute a lesbian tradition of writing. Her model was later followed by Lillian Faderman, who depicted the companionship between women during the nineteenth and early twentieth century in America. She referred to these female companions as lesbians, a stance that was highly questioned since it completely overlooked the physical aspect of the relationship that led to the shaping of the very experiences and identities of these women. She presented the concept of "romantic friendship"[22] and applied it to women of the older eras when they bonded with each other on a wider scale, which is emotional and not necessarily sexual, thus almost universalising the very concept of lesbian desire. Though, one does find indications of occasional passionate erotic behaviour on the part of these women, such relationships were shown to be accepted. Faderman remarked that:

> These romantic friendships were love relationships in every sense except perhaps the genital, since women in centuries other than ours often internalized the view of females as having little sexual passion. Thus they might kiss, fondle each other, sleep together, utter expressions of overwhelming love and promises of eternal faithfulness, and yet see their passions as nothing more than effusions of the spirit. (16).

Her project was to delve deep into why such romantic friendships between women were *quite* sanctioned during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but lost their status thereafter. She proceeds to explain that not all female same-sex relationships were looked down upon but only those that involved transvestite women, that is, women who dressed up as men since they seemed to threaten the masculine privileges in certain societies. Subsequently, the claims of universal sisterhood by lesbian feminists received massive criticism especially from the women of colour and working-class women who experienced racial and class-oriented oppression from other, especially white, middle-class, heterosexual women. Rich's idea of the continuum tends to diffuse lesbian identity because it undercuts the sexual dimension that is regarded to be the point of demarcation between a heterosexual woman and a lesbian. Similarly, Faderman too, it seems, negates the sexual aspect of the lesbian figure.

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[22] Faderman, Lilian. *Surpassing The Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present.* Great Britain: The Women's Press, 1985. Print.

Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua depicted how both lesbians and other feminists had failed to understand the racial complexities in the multiple dimensions of identity.[23] Audre Lorde becomes significant in this context as she emphasises on the "theory of difference." According to her, the general category 'woman' is inflected with a number of dimensions. So a 'woman' is a product of her locations and experiences that are multiple and varied in nature. Lorde focusses on the areas of race and sexuality and states that the experience of a white woman is different from that of a black woman and the latter becomes 'the other' of the former who is considered to be the norm. Similarly, the experience of a lesbian and especially a black lesbian becomes a source of double oppression with respect to dominant white heterosexuality. She explains:

> It was hard enough to be Black, to be Black and female, to be Black, female and gay. To be Black, female, gay, and out of the closet in a white environment, even to the extent of dancing in the Bagatelle, was considered by many Black lesbians to be simply suicidal. And if you were fool enough to do it, you'd better come on so tough that nobody messed with you. I often felt put down by their sophistication, their clothes, their manners, their cars, and their femmes.[24]

By the mid-nineteenth century, Paris, the French capital was the locale which produced the maximum number of imaginative writings on lesbianism. Since the place had retained its relaxed publishing laws, books on lesbianism that were censored in England were comparatively easier to obtain here. Radclyffe Hall's famous lesbian novel *A Well of Loneliness* (1928) was banned in England on account of obscenity after its publication, but it went on to sell about one hundred copies a day at Paris, making the character of Stephen Gordon memorable and a celebrity of Hall. Many lesbian writers like Gertrude Stein and Alicia B. Toklas lived together as couples here for many years and had set up a salon which openly encouraged artists to discuss and write on the issue. In 1922, Stein herself published *Miss Furr and Miss Skeene*, a story based on real life American lesbian couple, Maud Hunt Squire and Ethel Mars.

Homosexuality has never really been free of social ostracism by the various patriarchal institutions and/or administrative forces. The Stonewall riots in 1969 remain as the first instance in American history when the members of the homosexual (transgender) community actually fought back against the police that had persecuted these sexual minorities. It marked the

[23] This argument gets constituted in the collection of articles called *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour* by Moraga and Anzaldua in 1981.

[24] Lorde, Audre. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. New York: The Crossing Press, 1982. 244. Print.

beginning of the gay rights movement in the United States, after which gays and lesbians all over New York started forming cohesive groups. Joan Nestle established the Lesbian Herstory Archives in 1975, acknowledging "its creation to that night and the courage that found its voice in the streets."[25] This episode actually led to the 'coming out' of many lesbians and gays who, all this while were unable to confront the homophobic society around. Gay bars became the new space where the people of homosexual community could interact and intermingle freely.

It has been observed that in comparison to the feminist movements in the West, the lesbians were at a loss in the Indian scenario since they never had a say in such movements here. The option of radical feminism was totally absent.

THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Unlike the West, a certain kind of ambiguity is attached to the very term 'feminism' in India accompanied by an almost complete silence on the same-sex desiring woman from Indian feminism itself. The term 'feminist' might have a western origin but the phenomenon is prevalent elsewhere also, including across the subcontinent.[26] Various factors like cultural institutions, religious practices, racism, even homophobia, tend to pose challenges to the concept of a feminist movement in India. Irrespective of whether the media represents such a movement as consolidated, feminism does remain a domain of multiplicity. Hence, feminism gets questioned by many including those who actually participate(d) in the feminist movements.

Such ambivalence can be justified only by the need to define 'feminism' in a particular context and in a specific way. As Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan state, the definition of feminism has a dynamicity that cannot be fixed. Rather, it adheres to changes as per history and culture.[27] Feminism and the feminist struggles in India were a result of the development of consciousness towards democratic rights and injustice done to the masses.

The period of foreign rule had brought in despotism and such struggles were signs of protest against the same. Women too led their voices against the evils prevalent in the society which

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[25] Appeared as a description in a report on the National Historic Landmark Nomination conducted by the U.S Department of Interior, National Park Service during the Stonewall Riots but later edited by Kathleen LaFrank.
[26] Chakravarti, Uma. *Archiving the Nation-state in Feminist Praxis: A South Asian Perspective*. New Delhi: Centre for Women's Development Studies. 2008. Print.
[27] Bhasin, Kamla and Nighat Said Khan. "Some questions on Feminism and its Relevance in South Asia." *Feminism in India*. Ed. Maitrayee Chaudhuri. New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 2004. 1-7. Print.

further helped in the constitution of legal acts against the practices of sati, purdah and the acceptance of widow remarriage, education for women, amongst many others. Aparna Basu links nationalism with feminism in India and points out at the absence of "the man woman antagonism"[28] that constitutes women's movement in the West. Similarly, being a feminist in India is an issue inflected with numerous debates.

Madhu Kishwar states how being labelled a feminist "puts you in a tight box. People expect you to have no opinion other than that of women's equality," [29] where as in reality, the major concern is about the protection of the human rights on a whole and women's rights constitute a portion of it. Mary E John claims that those who were associated with the women's movement and have suggested problems with the relationship between the West and feminism, "seem to have missed its essential aspects"[30] which is the women's cause. Flavia Agnes remarks how in trying to defy the western affiliation tag slapped on Indian feminists, Indian feminists themselves take refuge in "the Hindu iconography and Sanskrit idioms denoting women's power" thus falling into the familiar trap of reasserting their communal ideology.[31]

One has to understand that there is a marked difference in the very nature of the concept of feminism in the West and in India. The distinction is due to the nature of the society and the political situations of both contexts during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While women in Europe and America demanded for specific agendas like their legislative and reproductive rights, Indian women were yet to understand the meaning of personal freedom and selfhood.

So in the country that was experiencing independence from the British rule and getting acclimatised to the democratic system along with its value structures, the challenge of feminism was to actually make the women population aware of its potential. Further, the term 'feminism' did (and does) not had/have a positive connotation in India, as in the West, simply because women were not yet free from their traditionally assigned roles in patriarchal society. But, unlike in the West, where women actually faced hostility from their male counterparts, in India both

[28] Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. Introduction. *Feminism in India*. Ed. Maitrayee Chaudhuri. New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 2004. xxi. Print.
[29] Kishwar, Madhu. "A Horror of 'isms':Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist." *Feminism in India*. Ed. Maitrayee Chaudhuri. New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 2004. 26. Print.
[30] John, Mary.E. "Some Reflections on the Constitutive Role of Contexts." *Feminism in India*. Ed. Maitrayee Chaudhuri. New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 2004. 246. Print.
[31] Same as 28.

men and women contributed towards achievement of the women's rights. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar were few of the active male reformers who worked for the emancipation of women.[32]

It has been debated that the women's movement in India focused more on marriage and the socio- legal codes associated with it thus forfeiting the essence of liberation. Moreover, there is a constant desire to search for indigenous roots through the movement. Such typical manifestations have given rise to what Radha Kumar calls "indigenous feminism"[33] and she regards it as problematic in the pluralistic society of India. Though the term 'indigenous' is contestable, it is interesting that the lesbian movement in India seeks its very legitimacy from these 'indigenous roots,' noted Giti Thadani.

In her essay, "Rescaling Transnational 'Queerdom': Lesbian and 'Lesbian' Identitary-Positionalities in Delhi in the 1980s," Paola Bacchetta invents the term 'identitary-positionality'[34] to refer to a political stance within a particular temporal and spatial zone that is dynamic enough "in its relation to a shifting symbolic-material context traversed by multiple glocal flows." (112). Such a position would enable in defining lesbians as per themselves and the feminists, for whom 'woman' always did not mean a unified identity. She analyses how during the 1980s there was a discrepancy in the context of identitary terms, as we see the use of multiple terms for lesbians in accordance to the degree of agency granted. The essay in general deals with the problems of the varied representations of the 'queer' made in the fields of academics,

[32] Sangari, Kumkum and Sudesh Vaid. Introduction. *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History.* Eds. Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990. Print. They present a critique of such practices of social reform and suggest that they demonstrated anxieties around the control over women, their bodies as well as their sexualities. There is a critique of marriage as an institution but not that of heterosexuality. They suggest that the various rights that were considered to be empowering women were not without its flipsides. Like – imparting English education to the women of upper classes actually constituted a new woman who was "the product of a new patriarchy formed along class lines." (Partha Chatterjee). The formation of the Bengali bhadramahila was one such aspect. Further these reforms themselves were very class specific. They did bring about a kind of revolution within the middle class population but issues like – child marriage, female education, eradication of polygamy etc, remained afar from the lower stratas.

According to the authors, a 'recasting' of women took place through the reform movements as they entered into complex relationships with the notions of nation and community. They were made more compatible to marital unions and efficient towards familial duties. The participation of the middle class women in the professional space and political movements made them functional both within the domain of home and outside.

[33] Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. Introduction. *Feminism in India*. Ed. Maitrayee Chaudhuri. New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 2004. xxiii. Print.

[34] Bacchetta, Paola. "Rescaling Transnational 'Queerdom': Lesbian and 'Lesbian' Identitary-Positionalities in Delhi in the 1980s." *Sexualities*. Ed. Nivedita Menon. New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 2007. 103-127. Print.

activism, leisure etc that tends to differ as per location like within a local regional site or on a wider transnational platform. What Bacchetta does is to study the various dynamics of representations or effacements of queer identitary position both in the context of U.S and Delhi in the 1980s and with regard to the power structures such as - class, race, colonies even the various systems that lead to women's oppression. So in a way she is mapping the queer position from a local to the transnational space.

It can be said that though the women's movement in India was forced to deal with caste and class owing to the societal structures, it still did not deal with same-sex desire between women as such. However, numerous efforts have been made in that direction and one such fruitful attempt was the national conference of women's movement held at Calicut in 1990 that witnessed some discussion on the lesbians though in a very discreet manner. The next conference held at Tirupati in 1994 was actually the result of a demand of having an entirely separate session for lesbians only where they could openly speak about their 'woman-centred/oriented sexuality.' Since it was the first meeting of its kind, they had to face minor opposition during the workshop they conducted, but about twenty-five lesbian and bisexual women came together speaking of their life experiences and listening to each other as a gesture of support. They attempted to comprehend the significance of one's sexual preferences and discussed how women's movement could assign a space for lesbians to deal with the issues that they have to confront.

Lesbianism in the Indian context suffers due to the problematic of invisibility. In *Sakhiyani: Lesbian desire in Ancient and Modern India,*[35] Thadani tries to trace this tradition of lesbian invisibility especially through architecture but remarks that this phenomena is linked to "the myth of intolerance" which further presents a rather contradictory argument. "Firstly, that lesbians do not exist and secondly, that there is no discrimination against them."[36]

Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai in their anthology *Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History*[37] traces representations of homosexuality in the numerous written materials of Indian tradition and

[35] Thadani. Giti. *Sakhiyani: Lesbian desire in Ancient and Modern India.* New York: Casell, 2006. Print.
[36] Thadani, Giti. "Silence and Invisibility." *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing From India.* Ed. Ashwini Sukthankar. New Delhi: Penguin, 1999. 149. Print.

[37] Vanita, Ruth and Saleem Kidwai. *Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History.* New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008. Print.

categorizes them into the ancient, medieval and modern time periods.[38] Owing to the diversity in Indian communities and languages, works of translations have also been included thus presenting a compact study of same-sex desire in the regional as well as the popular culture. The texts represent a wide range of responses towards same-sex love that is "from celebration to clinical detachment to disapproval to hostility." (Vanita and Kidwai xxix). They emphasize upon the point that same-sex love has been considered as a product of Westernization and how this 'myth' has found its way even into the scholarly domain of India thus highlighting the homophobic trend in the same. However with time, Indian visual culture like- theatre, cinema and television seem to be more progressive in the representation of same-sex desire.

Ashley Tellis opens his essay, "Postcolonial Same-Sex Relations in India: A Theoretical Framework"[39] by stating that "The LGBTHK movements in India draw simultaneously on a precolonial legacy, a colonial past and a postcolonial present to fight their battles on an ever-changing, globalised terrain" (221), thus indicating at his area of study that constitutes the rather complex and pluralistic space of same-sex relations in India. His paper explores and interrogates the very constitution of the postcolonial through its consequent effects on people's lives. He provides a clear cut chart of the various identities in the arena of LGBTHKQ, and categorises them on the basis of their time of emergence as pre-colonial, colonial, postcolonial as well as the postmodern, posing a larger question that "How do all these moments coexist in the construction of same-sex politics in India?" (Tellis 222). It is in the light of studying such relations in precolonial India that he presents a critique of both these texts (Thadani's as well as Vanita and Kidwai's). He comments on how Thadani's work focuses on the use of the term 'lesbian' which is historically not viable if 'ancient India' is taken into context. The word clearly has a modern-day origin owing to its emphasis on the domain of erotics. Vanita and Kidwai's project, once again, reads into the ancient Hindu texts like the Mahabharata or the nineteenth century Rekhti poetry and attempts to establish a pre-colonial period that was supposedly tolerant of homosexuality. Such a claim, Tellis argues, is historically untenable. With regard to homosexuality being blamed as a Western 'evil' to have corrupted India and led to its

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[38] Anthologies of this nature existed in the West as well. For example – *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian and Bisexual Literature from the 17th century to the Present* by Lilian Faderman that represents about four centuries of lesbian writings. It also discusses the changing perspectives regarding lesbian literature and that it can be divided into different genres of writing.

[39] Tellis, Ashley. "Postcolonial Same-Sex Relations in India: A Theoretical Framework." *Space, Sexuality and Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. Manas Ray. Calcutta: CSSS, 2003. 221-231. Print.

degradation, they suggest that "neither 'Western' nor 'Eastern' influence is pure or unmixed and neither has fixed value" in which case this entire division into precolonial/colonial periods in terms of tolerance of same-sex love seems debatable.

Further, Tellis points to a rather peculiar distinction offered by the editors between 'love' and 'sex'. The anthology claims to depict only love relationships. The involvement of a sexual act is not an important criterion but there is ample evidence of 'passion' and 'erotics' in such relationships which contradicts their very argument of representation. Moreover, there is no effort put to either historicise or even interrogate the use of such terms at various historical levels as well as socio-cultural contexts reinstating how homophobia of the present day works in the process of reconstitution of such traditions. Irrespective of all categorizations, the anthology seems to almost romanticize and idealise the pre-colonial society that was tolerant of homoerotic desires and politically present it as a counter to the colonial period that seemed to have destroyed an otherwise liberal spirit of mind.

A nineteenth century British law criminalised any kind of unnatural sexuality, meaning that anything against the norms of heterosexuality was liable to legal prosecution but was specifically known as the sodomy law. It was incorporated within the Indian Penal Code under Section 377 that surely made a crime out of male homosexuality but lesbianism was also not really left out of the framework of the legal structure.

What Section 377 really implied was that the lesbian identity would not be acknowledged until it was articulated or expressed suitably. By inference, then, the self-identified Indian lesbian is viewed as inherently Western, and has to therefore face frequent criticism on this account. A tag of deviancy was perpetually attached to lesbianism even if it was not that clearly expressed. Lesbians became easy target of victimisation to the already homophobic Indian society. Cases of lesbian battering, rape by male members of the family, even murder, appeared as consequences. Ashwini Sukthankar complains that:

> One longs for the luxury to be impatient with the question of whether or not lesbianism is part of Indian tradition. Those of us who live out the twin truths of being Indian and lesbian know what we are and where we came from, and are too busy with the day-to-day struggles of our lives to

yearn for lost utopias when women's love for women was celebrated on temple wall paintings and in ancient scriptures.[40]

The surprising fact remains that reference to ideas about same-sex desire between women in the Indian context is available in the post-Vedic Sanskrit literature ranging generally from epics to ayurveda. Such texts view such desire in a negative light since it defies the most important factor in the code of conduct of being a woman that is reproduction. It was thus seen as plain promiscuity and excessive female passion that did not participate in the normative division of labour. Rather, it served as the pleasure principle only. Such acts posed a threat to societal norms. Hence numerous punishments have been found to be associated with such practices as methods of policing or ways of social control.[41]

There has been an assumption that the theorisation of such desire is predominantly a western endeavour or that there has been a dearth of interest and patience in societies like that of India where people's problems require immediate action-oriented solutions. So till the 1990's, there was a serious lack of a body of feminist scholars here who would engage in academic conversations on the question, let alone struggles at the political level over it as compared to the feminist debates in the West which enjoyed proper representation owing to its categories of radical, liberal, socialist, Marxist feminisms.

Therefore, lesbian issues and their textual expressions come to the forefront here way later in the twentieth century onwards. Scholars like Giti Thadani, Ashwini Sukthankar and Ruth Vanita are the pioneers responsible for the initiation and development of lesbian studies in the country. By exploring some of the ancient and modern texts and facets of same-sex sexuality, they provide a view of the nature of the Indian lesbian representation.

Ranjita Biswas in her essay "Of Love, Marriage and Kinship: Queering the Family"[42], which is perhaps the first attempt at theorizing the lesbian subjectivity in India, tries to define what she calls a lesbian standpoint theory, though her model suffers from some defects. She begins by

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[40] Sukthankar, Ashwini. 'Editor's Note'. *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing From India.* New Delhi:Penguin, 1999. i. Print.

[41] Kumar, Mira. "Lesbians in Indian Texts and Contexts." *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing From India.* Ed. Ashwini Sukthankar. New Delhi: Penguin, 1999. 217-232. Print.

[42] Biswas, Ranjita. "Of Love, Marriage and Kinship: Queering the Family." *Intimate Others: Marriage and Sexualities in India.* Eds. Samita Sen/Ranjita Biswas/Nandita Dhawan. Kolkata: Stree, 2011. 414-435. Print.

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considering kinship and eros as the two significant aspects of intimacy. She shows how heterosexuality has become the yardstick of considering which relations are viable and can be acceptable. The institutions of marriage and reproduction further facilitate the maintenance of this authority of heterosexuality as the only source of intimacy. Therefore, the sense of kinship that is dependent upon marriage and family structures gets limited within the heterosexual paradigm only. The heterosexual mode of penetrative sex discards the possibility of any other mode of sexual practice. So anything that fails to qualify as per the criteria of heterosexuality, is either done away with or made invisible or even made to align with the patterns of the dominant state. In a way then, Biswas is trying to create a position of 'Us' versus 'Them' in her persuit of theorization. She says that:

> ...I argue that rethinking from the lives of women inhabiting such 'inviable' sexual margins can provide us with critical insights about our own lives and help build a different picture of the world around us by foregrounding the possibility of a wide spectrum of intimacies, sexualities and living practices. I take off from the lives and loves of lesbian women to ground my arguments. (414-415).

From considering the notion of sexual pleasure and intimacy to the institutionalization of it through marriage to the consequent formation of a family that nurtures kinship ties, Biswas very systematically draws a framework and distinguishes these positions or conditions with respect to heterosexual women as well as lesbians, reasserting the predominant 'Us' and the 'non-viable' 'Them' demarcation. She also explores how the state and legal apparatuses handle the sanction and regulation of the various social practices and institutions for both these positions of concern. It is in contrast to such a set up that Biswas attempts to claim for a new standpoint through which lives will be perceived from the position of the most marginalized in the society, in this case, the lesbians. A lesbian standpoint then provides an alternate position to the heteronormative stand. She follows Butler's argument in which she establishes a lesbian standpoint as the counter point to heterosexuality. As Butler mentions in her argument:

> "Why a standpoint? Standpoint – because we do not consider ourselves victims, victims in need of the benevolence of the heterosexual Social. Standpoint – because we do not consider ourselves marginalized and crave for inclusion in the given frame of the heterosexual Hegemonic. Standpoint – because we do not wish to remain 'embodied insiders' within our ghetto. Standpoint

– because we do value our lived lives, our complex position(ings), our language(s). Standpoint – because we wish to pose against the heterosexual hegemonic a counter- hegemonic imagination of the sexual."[43]

However, such a standpoint is borrowed by Biswas from the domain of Western feminism and lesbianism completely overlooking the fact that there are hardly any self-identified lesbians in the Indian context. Most subjects of same-sex desire in women do not identify themselves as lesbians and their worldviews appear enmeshed within the heteronormative structure in many ways. Therefore she romanticizes the idea of lesbian intimacies and lesbian lives to produce a model of the lesbian standpoint that is free from any power relations and hence appears dream-like.

The ground reality here is that the women are products of class, caste, nationalist and even gender subordination. So how can there be a lesbian standpoint when women are not even ready to acknowledge themselves as lesbians? A minimal engagement is required, that is one has to be aware of what it is to be a lesbian at least theoretically to be able to provide a justified picture of this community, something which is absent in the Indian context. Even a critique of the institution of marriage and the demand of marriage rights by the queer community are significant projects to be undertaken for a new understanding of conjugality, intimacy and formations of kinship here. Biswas suggests that the lesbian standpoint is a way of interpretation or a new system of knowledge that creates its own positions and perceives the already established structures of the heterosexual as well as the homosexual domain from within it. This might appear to be a viable theoretical argument but is a singularly unrealistic account of human relations, that puts a huge burden on lesbian subjectivity (which is already oppressed in the patriarchal conditions) and is a utopian conception of relations between women.

Navaneetha Mokkil in her article "Lives Worth Grieving For: Lesbian Narratives From Kerala,"[44] attempts to provide a sociological study of the lesbian lives in Kerala for a particular understanding of South Asian/ Indian same-sex desire between women. Her area of concern is the increasing number of lesbian suicides in the rural areas of the region, which she also considers to be a reason for sexuality to have attained the position of an important political

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[43] Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004. 7. Print.
[44] Mokkil, Navaneetha. "Lives Worth Grieving For: Lesbian Narratives from Kerala." *Intimate Others: Marriage and Sexualities in India*. Eds. Samita Sen/Ranjita Biswas/Nandita Dhawan. Kolkata: Stree, 2011. 391-413. Print.

matter in Kerala over the last two decades. She looks into the suicides particularly amongst women who belong to the lower or lower middle classes and the tribal community. Owing to their caste and class-specific backgrounds, these women do not have the option of 'coming out' like their urban counterparts. So the suicides or the acts of dying together (with their partners) almost become the only way to establish their true identity of being lesbians. While she asserts that she is not positing the lesbian subject as a site of radical resistence, she cannot but help argue that such resistance is precisely what these suicides offer, though not in the languages of identity politics or the international gay and lesbian discourse.

Mokkil analyses the documentary, *Sancharram* (The Journey) directed by diasporic Malayali director Ligy Pullapally (based in Chicago, USA) in 2004 and an anthology of narratives on lesbian relationships called *Beyond Myths: Homosexuality in Kerala* published in Malayalam, in Kerala 2004, in order to understand the various ways in which lesbian desire gets expressed in the public sphere of Kerala post 1990s.

She agrees that even if there exists a multiplicity in the 'social forms of desiring,' there also exists a power structure that does not sanction all kinds of desires by all kinds of bodies. It is a regulatory process that facilitates a kind of hegemony of some over the other. She intends to investigate into the nature of these hegemonic structures that are responsible for recognising certain desires and not all.

The film *Sancharram* is a positive representation of lesbian love where the two women, Kiran and Delilah, overcoming all societal odds and evading the option of committing suicide, finally embark on a journey together trying to discover each other as well as to establish their own individual selves. Chicago-based director, Ligy Pullapally, creates almost an idyllic atmosphere of community and living probably with an intention of giving a hopeful climax in response to the occurrence of the tragic deaths, but such a representation runs contrary to the real situation of such women in the villages of Kerala whose lives are synonymous with pain and followed by death.

It depicts a particular class hegemony, like that of the Nair family to which Kiran belongs and hence the individual rebellion that she takes up for the sake of her lover against the rest of the society seems justified within the narrative of the documentary. The social setting also does not

only adhere to the rural space of Kerala. Rather, Kiran is shown to have arrived from Delhi and has the option of taking refuge in that urban territory when she is confronted with numerous troubles when her relationship with Delilah gets revealed. The class factor also comes into play since only an upper class woman can be shown to be independent and able to execute her wishes at the end. All these factors act as agencies for the documentary to be able to avoid a lesbian suicide and posit a rather positive metaphorical end.

In the above mentioned anthology, Mokkil concentrates on a collection of personal interviews conducted by the activist group and helpline, Sahayathrika, in a report dealing with the suicide of two young tribal girls, Meera and Ammin (names changed) in August 2001. They had wanted to get married, but were constantly denied permission by family members. They had been also taken to the local police station and made to undergo treatment under a psychiatrist. The interviews present the varied opinions of a number of individuals, like relatives and friends who were associated with the young girls, which goes on to depict how such suicides are articulated by them. While some consider such unconventional acts as acts of defiance, some, like Meera's mother, blame her own community for the deaths and calls them murder. This variety of observation procured in the interview shows that it is "an attempt to write this suicide into the collective memory and also to understand how a community of people in a rural setting view and describe an intimate sexual relationship between two women." (Mokkil 399). The cultural settings and the social institutions to which these women belong ultimately become the causes of their death.

Interestingly, Mokkil privileges the documentary over the fictional piece, not allowing the latter the right to a re-imagining, even as she uses popular romance fiction in Malayalam, a subversive use by the women lovers in the Sahayathrika Report, she analyses. My examination of fiction in this dissertation shows that such re-imaginings are possible and highly fruitful, even if and when they may be contaminated by the languages of identity politics of different kinds.

So against the backdrop of the contexts delineated above, I will examine a few literary texts in English from India and look at representations of same-sex desire between women in the light of the emerging discourse around women who love women in India and a rapidly visible 'queer' movement in the country. These include, principally, a fictional account by 'Qamar Roshanabadi' and the short stories of Parvati Sharma. The fact that these texts are in English

means that they come from a particular class and that they are familiar with the term 'lesbian' and 'queer.' Yet I argue that even within this restricted milieu, well-informed by Western contexts, some representations of same-sex desire between women, marked by a particular South Asianness/Indianness, gives us a sense of what a South Asian/Indian lesbian or same-sex/queer desire would look like and it is this desire that I seek to delineate in this research.[45]

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[45] There is no doubt that there are many rich representations of same-sex desire between women in various Indian languages, like – Ismat Chughtai's *The Quilt/Lihaf* (1941) in Urdu and Kamala Das's *The Sandal Trees* (1988) in Malayalam, to name a few, which are the trend setters of lesbian writing. But such texts do not constitute the focus of this work, not just because of my lack of knowledge of these regional languages but also because I want to see how queerness/same-sex desire between women is articulated in English.

Chapter 3

Reading the queer 'qissa' of Someshwar P Balendu

Qamar Roshanabadi's "The Complete Works of Someshwar P Balendu"[46] was published in *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* edited by Ashwini Sukthankar in 1999. The anthology was considered the first text of its kind in India that comprised writings by lesbians from autobiographical pieces to critical comments on their lives in the country. The anthology thus negotiates the very construction of the identity of lesbian in the Indian context. Sukthankar's introduction is crucial as it opens up various questions around an Indian 'queer' subjectivity that distinguishes itself from hegemonic representations of this subject that empty it of sociological particularity and expressive language of a culturally specific variety. Her introduction tries to fit in a lot of aspects within the term 'lesbian' since the various contributors define 'lesbian' desire and identity in multiple ways. Many of the contributors are still closeted, some use pseudonyms to disguise their real identities, all of which provide a secrecy too to the entire volume. The real life experiences are commendably narrated but a general tendency of concealment remains.

Sukthankar begins rather sceptically with the question whether there are lesbian writers in India, the answer to which is obviously affirmative. The reason behind such scepticism is the treatment that the lesbians have received in India in trying to express their presence in public, which has been inhibiting for same-sex identified women. She cites how one of the contributors to the anthology who preferred to be anonymous could not be made to script a small article and required vigorous convincing for hours. "Write as a lesbian? Sorry, forgotten how," was her reply on further insistence. But what is noteworthy is the urgency to fictionalise the real life experiences on pen and paper by these writers. "I'll call it fiction…After all it would be appropriate to call it that,"[47] was her reaction even when she was about to use a pseudonym for her writing. She was a well-known lesbian novelist of the 1960s who was forced to write under a

[46] Roshanabadi, Qamar. "The Complete Works of Someshwar P Balendu." *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*. Ed. Ashwini Sukthankar. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999, 267-283. Print.

[47] Sukthankar, Ashwini. Introduction. *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*. Ed. Ashwini Sukthankar. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999, xiii-xxxix. Print.

pseudonym and whose book was published only after she was compelled to transform her heroine (probably a butch lesbian) into a man.

The situation of lesbians in India is a matter of great concern as their very presence gets questioned time and again or concealed by sheer ignorance, if not because of fear of condemnation. The life of women communicating with each other is tolerated to the extent that "the sexual root of the relationship" (Sukthankar xiii) does not claim utmost importance. 'Ignorance is bliss' becomes true in the context of the lesbians as they are technically spared from the clutches of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that considers homosexual acts between men illegal[48]. The only reason behind the non-inclusion of the lesbians under this legal structure is the lack of penetration in their sexual encounters.

Sukthankar also agrees with the inevitability of the 'invisibility factor' or the 'deliberate erasure', which Giti Thadani talks about with respect to sculpture and language, of lesbian lives. This invisibility almost acts as a safety net which when removed exposes the lesbians to greater exploitation and, hence, writing 'fictions' out of 'real life'[49] and the using of pseudonyms are strategies that protect their real identities through concealment or secrecy.

The purpose behind the anthology was then an attempt to create a concrete zone of lesbian voices where such oral and written expressions of life can be shared amongst a trusted group that would understand as well as support their issues. It was through this sharing with each other that they intended to acquire a space of solidarity, a kind of community formation. Further, a severe lack of preserved records almost hinted towards the non-existence of a lesbian lineage or tradition, which is not plausible at all, reiterating the fact that there had been acts of intentional erasure or disguise. Therefore the act of writing and the constitution of this anthology becomes a significant step to reinstate the existence of the lesbians, their situations, their nature of differences and above all their lives.

Sukthankar claims that the varied expressions of lesbian lives in the anthology runs counter to any attempt to simplistically define the term 'lesbian.' It is a term that incorporates so many

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[48] However Section 377 has been struck down by the Delhi High Court in 2009.

[49] It should be mentioned that one is aware of both the fictive and discursive nature of both these categories, that is, creating fiction out of real life experiences and using pseudonyms, but they are used by the women to distinguish between the social and the psychic.

multiple dimensions that it seems unfair to "subscribe to any monolithic descriptions" (Sukthankar xxii) of the community and therefore the task at hand was difficult for her. She defines lesbian variously as "a political act of courage", "writing with the whole self…without any exclusion or censorship" (Sukthankar xviii) and as "an uncompromising term" (Sukthankar xx). Such varied engagement with the term gives rise to fraught notions about queer experiences on a whole. What seems to be an act of courage actually may lead to further alienation on the part of the lesbian who is already ostracised. Further, any self is a combination of multiplicities and to attempt to pin it down to certain fixities is actually a project that can be counterproductive. So the concept of the 'whole self' is a combination of numerous partial or extended selves that engage in exclusion and censorship from various dimensions. In trying to defend how 'lesbian' can be an uncompromising term, one needs to locate the exact position from which it can be regarded so. Although after much analysis, Sukthankar settles for the notion of "love for women" (xix), she does not specify the nature of that love. She says:

> Even for the contributors at ease with the word 'lesbian' and the definition – however enigmatic and fickle – that accompanies it, the identity clearly means a variety of things beyond the basic sense of being a woman who is drawn to other women. (xxvii).

Moreover, on exploring the domain of lesbian writing, Sukthankar engages with a number of possibilities that include women who prioritise the sexual act in their lesbian relationship, hence emphasize the erotic self; and others for whom it is a political stand as well as those for whom it is only a matter of human existence (one lesbian tells Sukthankar: "I just want to be gay, I don't want to attend conferences about it." xxix). Whether it is the totality of women-centred lives or encompassing events like Roshanabadi's story where the protagonist undergoes medical surgery to be with women and is thus a trans lesbian figure or some other narratives where women enter into lesbian relationships as a result of facing heterosexual violence, all of them constitute the wide array of 'women who love women'.

Further, Sukthankar places a set of criteria to explain the various sections of the book. The points of consideration that constitute the pieces under the section called 'Differences' are lesbians with a manly appearance, that is the butch lesbian, the performative aspect of gender owing to certain socio-cultural factors, the practice of sadomasochism and non-monogamy as a crucial form of lifestyle. These criteria are not really logically explained through the writings, because of

the diversity of experiences and its representations. In Roshanabadi's tale, the butch lesbian is attempting to procure the authority that a man possesses and the hijra[50] in a way plays the part of the woman. Elsewhere, sadomasochism is not really distinguished from the violence that often women have to face and the notion behind a non-monogamous lifestyle being a political act is not even considered. Therefore, there is a gap between the factors that Sukthankar considers to organise these narratives as well as essays in the anthology and the actual political and material contexts she examines. All these elements lie within the realm of the Indian middle class, something that she herself highlights. She acknowledges that the scenario is different for lesbians located in the rural areas of India, and hence she demands for better probing into their conditions as well[51].

It can be said that the varied engagement of the anthology with lesbianism helps in challenging its cultural frameworks and avoiding the loopholes of identity politics. It thus becomes an expression of the creativity of a collectivity that celebrates the ones who narrated their feelings as well as a tribute to the ones who were unable to join such a project due to unavoidable circumstances. Sukthankar attributes significance to these untold narratives as she says:

> ...this is a tribute to writing as a record of our lives, but also a reminder that no text or script can be substitute for the actual feat of living. We can never let ourselves forget that the story is not enough, and that there are some silences too immense for words to bridge. Perhaps sometimes, only the silence can speak our truth. (xxxix).

In this chapter, I will concentrate on one text from this pioneering anthology which, to my mind, comes closest to a 'queer' text in the utopian definition of term offered by Narrain and Bhan. In its deep awareness of caste, class, region, religion, gender and sexuality, its inventiveness in bending English to capture these various realities and its subversion of several orthodoxies in these various domains, it establishes itself as an exemplary text of the queer Indian canon.

The writer of the text "The Complete Works of Someshwar P Balendu" is called Qamar Roshanabadi, which most probably is a fictitious name. The protagonist is by all accounts a lesbian and she writes as Someshwar P Balendu, which is a male pseudonym. This embracing of

[50] A eunuch or a member of the 'third sex' is known as hijra in India.

[51] Maya Sharma has published her book *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Unprivileged India* in 2006 that showcases the life-stories of ten working-class lesbians living in the villages and small towns of India. The work undercuts the notion that lesbianism is primarily an urban concept.

a male name for narrating what can be said to be some of 'her own' life experiences clearly shows the levels of secrecy in which the authorial signature wraps itself. There is an urge to express oneself yet veils of concealment mark that expression. The issue regarding a Muslim authorship and a Hindu pseudonym tries to evoke a sense of religious solidarity as well as establish an ambiguity towards identity politics at the very onset of the story. Moreover, the title of the text invokes both the biographical and the authorial perspectives. So the concept of 'Complete Works' in a way gets parodied as well as redefined since it is ultimately one narrative (and not a Collected anything) of a person's life and that person concerned is not a man called Someshwar but the trans lesbian author of her own life-story which is also 'his' story as she wishes to be called by any name.

> Someshwar P Balendu. This is what I have named myself, but you can call me anything you wish, because now I am not who I was on the night of my birth. (Roshanabadi 267).

The narrative is what Ashley Tellis calls a speeded-up *bildungroman* that races its way from her birth to a considerable moment in her youth where she is shown to live life on her own terms.[52] The fact that it is a South Asian/Indian lesbian penning down her experiences and encounters gets established as she keeps account of the various cultural, political and religious registers which constitute a significant part of her growing up. This is indeed an important aspect of representation in India where an individual is depicted more as a product of such societal institutions rather than any organic self and what Roshanabadi does with these registers is to both subvert them and transform them into her own unique universe. Roshanabadi has herself agreed that the writing of their life experiences through fiction is a way which people living on the margins usually adopt to express themselves. She says:

> 'Gays are so habituated to experiencing the world as a pageant, a sport with strange rules that they cannot participate in…For me, immersing myself in creating a reality forces me to reassess that feeling of distance, of removal…I'm shaping the clay, but my hands *are* the clay.' (Sukthankar xxiv).

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[52] Tellis, Ashley. "Resisting the Mould: Same-sex Identities in Recent Indian Fiction." Globalisation, Ethnicity and Violence, Paper presented at the *South Asian Literary Association (SALA) Conference*, San Diego, California, 26-27 December, 2003. Unpublished.

The narrative begins with the birth of the protagonist, followed by an auspicious moment when the family pundit does the sacred deed of deciding a name for the child with the letter 'p'. 'Purnima'[53] is what she is called to the delight of her mother and the neighbourhood women, something of which she obviously is not very proud, though she humorously mentions her uncanny relation to the moon at various stages of her life. In fact, she seems quite glad to do away with the name in the course of writing this tale.

The very opening of the story with the notion of 'call me anything,' cited above, undercuts the idea of the author scripting the tale and the title which hints towards the content. She uses the Hindu association with the moon and her own name being 'Purnima' as tools for constructing her own lesbian tale. The use of Hindi movies to convey parts of the narrative is a strategy she undertakes that works a bit like the parts of a Hindi film, to move the narrative along but also to enter affective moulds that contain their own reservoir of resonances. She romanticizes her own lifelong association with moons as she remarks:

> Later I also came to love moons. New moons are broken bangles, half moons are smooth foreheads, full moons are shining faces. I even loved the tear-soaked light of cardboard moons in the romantic scenes of old Hindi movies. And the moon I love most of all is the crescent trembling in the matted hair of the lord of yogis, om om om. (Roshanabadi 268).

She belongs to a Hindu, middle class family which is apparent from the religious markers like the ceremony mentioned above and the ideology to which she adheres. Even later on, there are episodes like organising a 'gatha or katha or chalisa' and inviting people of the neighbourhood for participation. All point toward a moderately conservative Hindu background. Her mother is religious-minded and being anxious regarding her daughter's whereabouts, almost wants to abide by the pundit who advises her an immediate visit to the doctor.

Owing to her obsession, the mother fasts in the names of gods and goddesses, pays regular visits to pirs and yogis, runs to temples even at the slightest mention of them, only in order to see her child behaving like any other girl of her age would. The protagonist is a tomboy who is uncomfortable with the continuous occurrence of such religious drama and irritated with how she is not accepted in her real self even by her family. Even before she can come out as a lesbian,

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[53] Literally meaning the full moon in Hindi.

there are already stipulations imposed upon her in context of how she should look, dress or behave since she is born a girl. She says:

> My mother saw the way I was growing up, my never-combed boy-cut, my pockets full of cigarettes, my best-quality English-medium education hanging from my wrist like a kite no one taught me to fly, and began to keep fasts eight days out of seven till she was nearly fainting from hunger and despair, looking at me as if her womb had spat out a red chilli instead of a girl. (Roshanabadi 270).

The experiences of the protagonist depict the heterogeneity of the Indian experience. Consequently, the narration acquires a very heterogenous style that captures the various flavours of Indian culture, religion, social beliefs and day-to-day life patterns but never merely as artefacts. Almost every aspect is subverted or played around with in the creation of a sort of Indian-world-upside-down, an inverted lesbian Alice world.

The identity of an individual is defined in terms of their engagement with the various social and material factors. The English medium education that the protagonist has access to demands a certain kind of being from that individual which she fails to fulfill. Further, her appearance contradicts the expected pattern or looks of an adolescent girl as she resembles her male counterpart and picks up the supposedly male habit of smoking. There is an overall defiance of the norms, the norms of the usual heterosexual woman's look, the norms of quality education and finally of the norms of 'nature' that seemed to have created the narrator against its own 'laws.'

The narrator has a very charming way of describing even the gravest of her experiences. At times, the tone is sarcastic, at others it is plain humorous. The narrative moves at a dizzying pace. She talks about an incident during her adolescence when she was travelling in a night train to meet a cousin. It was over-crowded with hardly any space for physical comfort. An old man taking advantage of her innocence molests her. She undergoes sexual abuse that does not get fetishised at all. Rather it is portrayed as just another part of the growing up experience. She recollects the scenario:

> All night the pissing men spread their legs. All night the old surprised claw turned inside me, a piece of glass turning and turning. Dawn a splash of turquoise in pale water. Blood in my trousers

> dried to stone. All night the throats of distant boys shouting chai garam chai garam laddu samosa glucose biscuit chai garam chai chai chai. (Roshanabadi 268).

This sense of emotional detachment from an incident that has the potential to leave a scar on an individual's memory is absolute, so much so that the incident seems pretty ordinary. There is no hue and cry about the physical turmoil caused, nor does any blame game take place. The depiction is raw and real but the culprit is not even attacked with any feelings of anger or hatred. It is just recorded as some sort of *rite de passage* as the narrator moves on. It is as if men do not matter to her and can do no harm to her.

The narrator has a violent stand against any kind of religious orthodoxy inspite of it being an important part of the environment she grows up in. She completely rebukes the Pundit who prescribes a medical treatment for her saying that she is not normal. Her reaction also highlights her rebellious spirit. She is a strong-willed person and does not fall into the trap of vulnerability like her mother. She almost threatens the Pundit for making such a suggestion that appears offensive to her:

> Tell your pundit that the next time he comes here I'll feed him the leg of a tandoori chicken as prasad, and wipe my hands on his dhoti. And after that I'll plait his janeyu in his pigtail. Understand? (Roshanabadi 269).

She also attacks the pir whom her over-anxious mother consults to obtain the much sought after normalcy. The pir tries to give the most random cure possible which goes beyond the level of any logical comprehension. Such episodes prove the authority that religion has even over the educated middle class society which blindly trusts these forms of faith. But the narrator obviously puts her rebellious stand upfront:

> One pir gave her some soot scraped from the rim of a burning diya and said, "Tell your daughter to apply this daily like kajal, using her left thumb; it will destroy the influence of the evil eye." I said to my mother, 'You think that by churning water you are going to get butter? Tell your pir I'll use this kajal to dye his beard." (Roshanabadi 270).

Again, she gets a crude mastectomy done, which is not only a painful process but has worse after effects. First, she has the courage to undergo such an arrangement and then she humorously writes about it.

> I was not sure, but I thought my breasts might have been thrown into the municipal dustbin, buried in mango peels, eggshells, tea leaves and crusted sanitary napkins until dogs and sweeper's broom found them, ripening in the heat. Two small jewels, fit to blaze in the centre of any shehenshah's crown. (Roshanabadi 272).

The narrator weaves a magic realist narrative through her descriptions. She talks about the mastectomy in a similar tone of indifference to the sexual abuse that she was exposed to earlier, in a rather impersonal way, though such events have horrible bearings on her real life. As she gains consciousness after the operation, her imagination sketches the real life characters in a magic realist domain that once again draws connection to the moon images and Hindu mythology.

> The nurse standing by my bed when I woke looked at me as if I was Yamraj myself...I begged the nurse to give me something for the pain...the syringe pricked me once, twice, thrice, the blessed prongs of the trishul of the lord of yogis, om om om. Then I was able to close my eyes and let the agony flow into a mirror of glass, a mirror of silver, a mirror of water, a mirror of dreamless sleep, covering me like a wide moonlight wing of Brahma's swan. (Roshanabadi 271).

There is a certain degree of humour that the narrator shares in the company of the nurse almost hinting towards the possibility of a romantic scene between them. Even in midst of the enormous pain she manages to observe the nurse from head to toe, taking note of her each and every gesture. She even narrates to her a story of a village woman at an uncle's farm who lost one hand while working in the threshing machine. The hand had to be snipped off but someone stole her ring in the process. However, she was married off and the in-laws family adored her because of the way she made rotis with her stump whose nerves had now stopped functioning. An otherwise painful as well as a thought provoking story, the narrator inserts it as a non sequitur response to her being handed a photo of Christ by the nurse. The two narratives pass each other by and yet are the only means through which these two women communicate with each other. It is this sort of a parallel universe that Roshanabadi creates where nothing is utopian and very little actually goes right but what does happen takes on magical and resonant properties, symbolism is rendered askew and old narratives are defamiliarised so as to become entirely different and new. Christ has been used in an interesting way as a locket of a chain in the nurse's neck as well as a bright picture that the nurse thrusts into her pocket before they depart. The narrator notices a

close resemblance in her own condition with the Christian God as she claims, "From head to foot he was sprouting thorns, nails, bones, blood. His chest torn open like huzoor-e-ala big boss Hanuman's pointed yellow flames nibbling a heart red as a murder." (Roshanabadi 273). There is an interesting way of comparing the physical disability of the Christian God with that of the Hindu god figure, Hanuman, once again emphasizing on a coming together of two separate religions in an act of creative dissonance. The remarkable aspect however is the narrator's final comment on her own condition. After spending the most uncomfortable and painful night on the second class sleeper bed, she claims: "my back stayed soft as a petal, smooth as cream." (Roshanabadi 273).

The style of writing adds on to the marvellous effects. The writing itself is action-oriented, vivid, dynamic and the *chutnification* [54]of the language, mainly through borrowings from Hindi and Urdu, creates a particular kind of Indian writing that truly transforms the English language. This language is a happy mix of words from two other Indian languages in addition to English that are colloquially familiar to the Indian masses at large. Although the English language due to such intermingling sounds rustic in comparison to its usual sophisticated self, it captures the appropriate tone of the comment that the narrator makes at different moments of her experiences.

Even the use of slang like *chutiya*[55] fits into the very context, generally used for the men folk she dislikes. The word itself is rather sexist in nature, denoting the female genitals and by using it, the protagonist actually takes up the male form of speech. In a way, then, she is transforming into the man she so wishes to be, a change that is the consequence of the change in appearance. Later, when she goes out to take a walk in the market, on the first day after her operation, with her new look, she is mistaken for a man by an Afghan refugee who persuades her to buy a weird bottle of tonic to increase her 'manhood'. He says, "Beta, I promise you'll be on top of her so often and for so long, you'll scrape the skin off your knees." (Roshanabadi 274). The fact that she thinks of buying the tonic reinstates her desire to gain the power that a heterosexual man possesses but she counters her own desires. She is anti-Taliban and thus against their practice of keeping the women behind burqas and denying them free access to the world outside. This makes her a better

[54] The term was first brought into use by writer Salman Rushdie in his novel, *Midnight's Children (1981)*. 'Chutney' is basically an Indian side dish that adds more flavor to the main dish and by adding '-fication' to it, Rushdie transforms the Indian word into English. Therefore 'chutnification' in the novel means transformation of English having an additional connotation of making the language used in the narrative, more flavoursome and exciting.

[55] Hindi expletive used in the same context as 'fucker'.

'man' by comparison though she participates in the male language of sexual pornography and expresses her hatred towards the Talibans by addressing them as "bazooka-loving bullet-eating chutiya." (Roshanabadi 274).

However, a brief moment of disgust fills her mind as she catches a glimpse of cheap brassieres hanging from some bamboo poles in the marketplace. Probably, she is reminded of her breasts and the pain she had to undergo in order to get rid of them. The brassieres rankle her by being the ghostly presence of the loss of her earlier being as she feels the sensation of "bitter vomit uncoiling" (Roshanabadi 274) in her throat.

The narrator brings in various mythological and cinematic connections to express her feelings at various junctures that provides a certain multi-layered quality to her writing. The written text flows like a speech almost as if she were having a conversation with the readers. She describes her lonely life after the operation has taken place. She has no job, no money and has been abandoned by her family:

> I lay on charpai, naked. The ropes cut into my back. All day I was there, listening to the radio. Everything – lok sangeet, sobbing dramas, ghazals, bhajans, mushairas, kavi sammelans, goshthis, guftagus. Discourses on Atman and Brahman. Lectures on Marx and Engels. Film songs, from 'Chaudvin ka chand' to 'Choli ke Peechhey'. A hundred clapping ishq-ishq and zaalim pardanashin and ghuroor–e-husn and zakhm-e-jigar qawwalis. A hundred sighing barse kajrare nain and sajna re and panghat pe and ghata ghanghor dekh naache man ke mon thumris. All the ragas you can name, from Ahir Bhairav to Yaman Kalyan. Unbroken egg-shaped hours of tabla taals dha dhindhin dha dha tin tin dhage na tinaka dhi na dhin dhin dhagetirkitdhinatirdhadhita...When I listened to this news on afternoons hot enough and silent enough, I felt the gaps between the words widening to receive me. Like the earth opening to take Sita back after the agni-pariksha. But I loved the five minute Sanskrit news that made me think of my gotra ancestor looking into the lord of yogi's gyan-chakshu, a hair of blood-red light between its carved lids, om om om. (Roshanabadi 274-275).

This paragraph is a sample of the mix and the diversities that the narrator talks about throughout her story. It provides a glimpse into the various cultural, religious and spiritual dimensions that constitute her personality. The mix of Hindi and Urdu indicate towards her expertise in both the languages. The mash up of elements from the popular culture along with more traditional forms

of music and poetry and the ease with which they are both consumed generally, is an expression of the eclectic nature of her universe. It is a piece of writing richly endowed in Indian mythological references like Sita's sacrifice in Ramayana and opening of the third eye of Lord Shiva along with the Sanskritic associations of the gotra, all of which are used to identify with the narrator's state of mind. Such a wide range of arts and aesthetics not only establish a multifaceted persona of the protagonist, it justifies the constitution of a particular kind of Indian subjectivity that was being talked about earlier. This subjectivity incorporates the Indian spirit of experiences that the narrator undergoes which is a mix of religious beliefs and cultural influences that surround her in day-to-day life. There is also a general sense of subversion to these elements that constitute her subjectivity. Like the state of severe physical pain that she has to bear almost runs into a mockery as she playfully comments upon the range of songs or lyrical pieces she listens to, all of which depict a happy state of being quite contrary to her actual condition. The more serious pieces which include the 'lectures of Marx and Engels' or the 'discourses on Atman and Brahman' almost lose their gravity due to the listeners' situation where she has more basic things of need to take care of, like a proper shelter or source of income in order to survive. The narrator continues to express her affiliations and pokes fun at academia by referring to the students of the universities of Harvard and Oxford as 'the Forward' and 'the Backward' respectively. She calls them *mahamoorkhs*[56] in the context of the many scientific endeavours they take up that involve in-depth exploration and study of the planet to which we belong. The protagonist undercuts the very notions of such authoritative structures by turning them into humorous jokes so that they seamlessly make their way into the ordinary and fit into her world of storytelling.

She also has an obsession with gods and mythology as she keeps referring to them throughout her narrative. But this obsession is not reverential though thoroughly subversive. It is interesting to note how she manages to maintain a balance between these godly figures and the human aspects. Nowhere does she let the stereotypical representation of gods as supernatural or super powerful beings overshadow the essence of humankind. Gods for her are best depicted as iconographies of which she is very fond. Hence, she invokes them in association with articles of

[56] It is a Hindi word meaning great fools who completely lack sense.

day-to-day utility. The description of the idols of gods on a local bus and the treatment towards them evoke a grand combination between the divine and the ordinary.

The technique of subversion gets highlighted as she uses these gods and stories for her own purpose, that of creating a rather colourful narrative for her own self. She uses them to describe even the minutest of happenings in her life as she says, "When I listened to this news on afternoons hot enough and silent enough, I felt the gaps between words widening to receive me. Like the earth opening to take Sita back after the agni-pariksha," (Roshanabadi 275) almost equating herself with the mighty mythological figure and her situation to the divine grave occurrence.

There is a further joke made on these godmen who attempt to establish their superiority over the common masses by flaunting their spiritual relationship to the divine, but end up highlighting their falsities.

> …this bus I liked because next to the windscreen there were tin and plastic idols of every divine being your heart could desire. When the driver stopped at traffic lights and put a fresh match to his dead beedi, he touched the flame to a new agarbatti in front of one deity or the other, for keeping him alive on these roads of death. And he had a display of small cards like the one the nurse gave me of her sad god – every known and unknown guru, muni, sadhu, mahatma, acharya, saint, swami, rishi, baba, bhagwan, avatar, sai and sri sri maharaj, bald or bearded, in crippled padmasanas or erect on one leg like panchatantra herons. But the one I liked best was not a god but a godling – chubby, dimpled, dreaming. Lips curved like the new moon in his hair. (Roshanabadi 275-276).

The combination of using simple substances like tin and plastic to signify gods, the lighting of agarbatti with the same match stick by which the driver lights his beedi, figures of gods on small cards and the comparison of her favourite god to a child almost nullifies the divinity of the being. There is nothing 'godly' left in the gods she describes. They are brought down at par with the ones who tend to worship them.

The first episode of homophobia that Someshwar has to confront happens in the local bus when she is stared at by a group of men whom she refers to as "the chutiyas in the bus, flogging me with their 'what is this thing' stares from eyes like open manholes." (Roshanabadi 276). The

only respite for her is the picture of the god that she is so fond of. By looking at it she somehow manages to escape those dirty lewd stares. Such a scenario is enormously common in a society that is inhospitable to homosexuality. What attracted the stares was the unconventional appearance of the narrator who did not seem to fit into the stereotypical heterosexual categorization of gender. It must be mentioned that there is a tendency to fuse both gender and sexuality irrespective of their being starkly different. Butch lesbians are especially made the target of attack since their appearance challenges the usual ways of how a woman should look like.

Howsoever badly the narrator might have wished to undergo the mastectomy to acquire a more manly appearance, she still remains a woman at heart in some ways. She creates her own world of private erotica that is based on Hindu festivals mostly celebrated by women. She thinks of Karva chauth and recollects how the neighbourhood women would participate by trying to get a glimpse of the moon through sieve or thali at her mother's house. But it is the festival of Shivratri that releases her physical passion as she feels all her chakras working at tandem and rejuvenating her from within. The world seems to be in union and she glows in the inner erotic strength. She says:

> ...I am able to let all my chakras flower into slow joy till body is mind is breath is thought is world and I am overflowing with light and brimming with bliss through skin blood bone hair and groin navel heart throat brain flaring lotus petals blue as the neck of a peacock, dazzling gold, jewel green, smoky purple, red as sindoor. And the one most radiant luminous burning blinding pure moonsilver pearlwhite so beautiful my ecstasy throbs like a fresh wound and I became a fountain, om om om. (Roshanabadi 276).

The narrator meets new people and leaves quite an impression upon them. Like a vagabond, she moves around with her new body after the mastectomy, a new self exploring things and places that otherwise she could not have. She has an accidental encounter under the railway bridge with a woman who introduces herself as 'Raat ki Rani'[57] on one of her many aimless travelling ventures. A stranger walks up to her in the dark and asks for a cigarette. In the glow of the matchstick, she catches a glimpse of her face. Their first meeting seems to be directly inspired from a typical Hindi film that they both anyway are so inspired by. The woman is actually a

[57] Literally meaning 'Queen of the night' in Hindi.

hijra, probably out on one of her rounds and chances to come across the 'manly' narrator. There is a glimpse of their first conversation:

> I struck a match and held it to the tip of the cigarette so I could see her face in the glow. Then I said in a proper filmy style like Ajeeb Ashiq, 'My heart cannot accommodate the world, but it always has a room for a friend.' She laughed and growled, as she came closer and rubbed two humps against my chest, 'Sara sheher mujhe Raat ki Rani ke naam se jaanta hai!' I put my arm around her waist and blew smoke from the corner of my mouth and giggled in a high voice, 'Pyar se mujhe Som kehete hain.' (Roshanabadi 277).

There is an indication that love will unfold between the narrator and the hijra though the nature of that love cannot be exactly comprehended. The initial introduction is very alluring, similar to the cinematic styles of the heterosexual encounter. But the hijra addresses her as 'Beta' that creates a bond of affection between them that of an elderly person to someone younger or more commonly of a mother to her child. Even in the later part of their story together, the hijra refers to her as "my young bulbul" out of concern and her gestures almost make her a guardian figure of the young protagonist.

The dichotomy between the butch lesbian trying to be masculine and the hijra attempting to be feminine is played out brilliantly. The argument that 'gender is performative' gets highly emphasised as the butch lesbian is endowed with the authority of a man and the hijra wants to get culturally represented as the woman. They play by the codes of the heterosexual Indian encounter perfectly. Like a Hindu middle class woman, she feels shy while changing clothes. The narrator literally keeps a watch on the men passing by under the bridge as the hijra adjusts her sari. "...I stood there keeping some chutiyas away and thinking how a hijra could be as modest as a neighbourhood wife taking a purnmasi dip on the ghats of Allahabad," (Roshanabadi 277) says the narrator, conflating the hijra with the chaste heterosexual woman in a blasphemous move. So the real woman becomes the protector of the 'pretending to be' woman and the play between the two holds the potential to put the patriarchal structure into dilemma. In a way, then, the real woman turns out to be a better 'man' unlike the real men against whom the hijra had to take measures to protect her dignity from.

This strange meeting develops into a friendship that sees the narrator interacting with a larger group of hijras eventually. The railway bridge becomes the space where she bonds with the

hijras, helping them clean themselves and later watching them get ready for their night trip. It is worth observing how both the lesbian (as male lover) and the hijras share a bond of security, of trust with each other. They find mutual acceptance in each other. Contrary to the heterosexual society that treats them as either deviant or abnormal, they can be their own selves in each other's company. The narrator thus gets access to the rather secret lives of the hijra community. How they dress, how they perform, what their religious or spiritual views are come to her knowledge. She realises that 'Raat ki Rani,' however illiterate, is an expert midwife and also castrates men to make hijras out of them, an initiation rite prevalent in the eunuch community. [58]

There is a hierarchy in the community of these hijras. Those who undergo the pain of castration and become hijras are regarded as the brave and real ones, along with those who are naturally born as eunuchs. Others, who are basically males but take up the feminine attire are held lower in status. There seems to be a guru-chela tradition[59] amongst them where the teacher imparts his knowledge to the students. 'Raat ki Rani' was one such guru with numerous disciples who justified her position of authority. The protagonist in residing with them actually records an ethnography of the hijras observing their otherwise hidden lives from close and also attempting to become an insider to their very community.

The narrator is a responsible, educated individual and does make her political affiliations clear from time to time. She has displayed her anti-Taliban spirit and seems to be against China with regard to their treatment of the Tibetans. Having no work of her own, she makes herself useful for the group of hijras. She becomes their care-taker and does everything from stealing soaps for their bath to buying incense sticks for their worship of Bahuchara Mata.[60] On spending time in and around the Tibetan market from where she bought the incense sticks, she learns the ways of life of the people living in the slums there. She feels sympathy as well as gets enraged by the

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[58] Nanda, Serena. *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1990. 43-44. Print.

Reddy, Gayatri. *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006. 154-158. Print.

[59] Both Serena Nanda in her book, *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (1990) and Gayatri Reddy in her book, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (2005) talk about the guru-chela relationships. *Guru* means teacher, *chela* means disciple. This relationship is central to the hijra identity and forms the primary axis of their kinship and genealogical descent. It is a mutually beneficial relationship that takes care of each other's social and economic responsibilities. The rit ceremony is the ritual by which an initiate acquires the guardianship of a guru and hence the affiliation to the symbolic hijra house to which the guru belongs. The relationship is clearly hierarchical as the guru imparts knowledge and training to the chela about the hijra manners and rituals.

[60] She is an aspect of the Hindu mother goddess who is worshipped by the hijra community in India.

exploitation of the Tibetans in the hands of the Chinese. The China-Tibet relations depict animosity and the consequence of it which facilitates the former to literally make it impossible for Tibetans to survive on their own land. The Tibetans become victims to poverty, hunger, homicide and rape. The destruction of Buddhist monasteries and their holy books are ways by which the Chinese further cause harm to the religious and spiritual solidarity of the Tibetans. The narrator observes the pitiful condition of the Tibetans and says:

> Each month some new escaped Tibetans come there, hollow with fear and hunger, and peeled red and burnt black by the sun and the wind. Sometimes they have babies wrapped under their jackets; those that die on the way they bury in the snow. The chutiya Chinese are still raping and shooting, even so many years after smashing the huge golden Buddhas and bulldozing the monasteries and burning the holy books. (Roshanabadi 278).

Someshwar identifies with the condition of the Tibetans who are alive but do not possess the right to live. This is similar to her own condition where she has lost her home, her job, her acquaintances and is living like a refugee amongst the hijras. She surely has befriended new people who accept her the way she is, unlike the larger society that rebukes her, but the feeling of not belonging and abandonment causes her unbearable pain even as it helps build bridges with others in the same position of homelessness and non-belonging like the Tibetans.

The sarcasm of the protagonist reaches its zenith with her critique of religion. Earlier also she has not been supportive of the various religious ceremonies that her mother indulged in, neither was she ever a true believer of god. She is just fascinated by the entire realm and its power to attract the masses. But she engages in countering its dominant principles wherever possible. She makes fun of how the Indian society blindly follows rituals that do not make sense and have the tendency to create gods out of ordinary substances like stone, stick, twigs. There is no excuse for such actions as people continue with their tomfoolery irrespective of being educated or intellectually sane. She humours such endeavours along with a satirical, almost tongue and cheek comment on the so called 'godmen':

> ...after all, you could take any stick stone brick twig hibiscus flower and make a temple anywhere, it didn't matter if men had been pissing on that spot for seven births or rebirths; you could have a chikna pundit reciting 'Om namah shri peela chausa, Langrey ka mausa' or 'Jai baba

> surkh mehfooz tarbooz', and people would still keep coming because everyone needs a god for some reason or other. (Roshanabadi 278).

It is in association with her hijra friend that the narrator reads all kinds of news including that of lesbian and hijra marriages. The tendency to sensationalise such issues, further prove the nature of representation of this community of people by the media that still considers them as freaks. The social stigma is quite visible in the representations too. But as far as skills are concerned, 'Raat ki Rani' is an equal to any modern day obstetrician better known as 'dai-ma'[61] and a pioneer in the initiation rites of the hijras. Her efficiency in this field speaks for itself:

> When she operates its like an ant's bite...She ties the parts with a string, very tight, then she cuts, two cuts, left and right. She lets them bleed and bleed and bleed because all the man has to be drained out of the person. Then she pushes in a stick to keep open the pissing hole. The parts she drops in a pot and buries under a tree. With her knife she makes hijras from men, the brave ones. (Roshanabadi 279).

By making a statement that 'man has to be drained out,' the narrator makes an anti-patriarchal comment, reinstating that even if she wishes to be acknowledged as a man by the society she does not really want to become one. She prefers the gender role playing but wants it with her very being in-tact.

One evening on her way to visit 'Raat ki Rani,' the narrator decides to bring a gajra to weave into her hair. So she buys one from a dwarf at the traffic light. Her keen eyes observe even the minutest details of the woman and she almost creates a parallel world where she imagines that the woman's husband would also be a dwarf and frets over the difficulties she might have undergone during child birth. This ability to identify with anyone and to align one's own mind with the others' circumstances is a unique talent that the narrator possesses. It is this empathy that gives the protagonist's narrative its creative charge and its stunning combination of affective warmth and the complete lack of sentimentality. Once again, there is a playing of the typical Indian man-woman role as the narrator finally meets the hijra and the braided flowers find its way into the latter's tresses. The hijra gets drunk and takes her to a brothel, saying, "Meri aankh ka noor, mere dil ka qaraar, chalo mere saath, aaj jannat ki sair kara dete hain." (Roshanabadi 280). The narrator is not at all looking forward to this experience and feels disgusted by the end

[61] It is a Hindi term for a midwife.

of it. Probably, it is the first visit to the red light area for her as she keenly observes everything she comes across. The entire portrayal of the whorehouse is rather dystopic. It gives a very decadent picture of the life at brothel. Generally visiting the brothel as a male customer is an enjoyable experience but it seems otherwise for Someshwar. The condition of the prostitutes and the so-called vigilance by the police guards add on to the miserable condition of the place. She narrates her experience by saying:

> I didn't know where she was taking me, otherwise I would have made sure I was also drunk so I wouldn't have to remember the legs of all the chutiyas going up and down these narrow slimy stairs. The duty policeman sat on a stool, scratching himself and yawning. One woman was pressing the keys of a cracked harmonium, another woman was making half-dead mujra movements, and a third woman was wearing ghungroos on her wrists was beating *dha dhin dhin tad ha dhin na* on the floor with the policeman's lathi. (Roshanabadi 280).

She is absolutely against the way the sex workers have been kept and displayed. The dignity of a woman is done away with and she is treated like some non-living thing which has its utilities and necessities but devoid of a life as a human. The women are similar to the machines that men use for their need and discard once that purpose is served. The half-naked sex workers remind her of the helplessness that cannot be fought against. She becomes almost homicidal by the end of this experience and attempts to explain her disgust:

> The cigarette made me feel sick but more than that it was all the women on the stairs and in the dark wet corners and on the benches and squatting on the slimy floors and stained mattresses; all so young, in torn blouses and petticoats and bright cheap saris, all dripping powder and kajal, all watching the chutiyas going behind the torn curtains and emptying themselves like overflowing mouths into leaking spittoons. (Roshanabadi 281).

Although the narrator is distraught to see the conditions in which the female prostitutes live and survive, there is a lack of empathy towards them on her part. She is also very dismissive towards their right to work as sex workers. She clearly abhors men or even any contact with them and remarks, "The air smelt of men and I tried not to put my hand on anything because I felt as if the chutiyas had sprayed themselves everywhere." (Roshanabadi 280). Her abusing of men at various points in the story goes to establish the fact that probably she has a sense of hatred towards patriarchy in general. But this stint with the sex workers at the brothel actually brings

out the repulsion that she has towards men for whom the exploitation of a woman does fall under the category of entertainment or fulfillment of pleasure only. Trafficking of women is a topic of casual discussion as Qatilana Bai, the pimp, asks the narrator's preference in women mistaking her to be a man. Like a shopkeeper, she puts up women on sale expecting them to be bought by the customers who desire them, so she says, "I have every kind of girl here, from north south east west; fair dark thin fat; from Sri Lanka Nepal Pakistan Burma Bangladesh and even further." (Roshanabadi 281). The marketplace thus becomes a space that caters to the heterogenous customers though the narrator surely does not wish to be a part of that group.

On the way back from the whorehouse, the narrator is totally under the vigilance of the hijra, lest she do something nasty to give vent to her anger. Ultimately, she reaches home and confesses how desperately she wanted to put an end to such a slimy system of affairs:

> And until dawn I lay awake in my room, staring through the window grille, clenching my fists and wishing I could steal an AK-47 from those chutiya terrorists who blow up buses and trains. And feed it with a cartridge belt stretching from Delhi to Bombay. (Roshanabadi 281).

The protagonist in her fit of anger and anxiety provides us a glimpse of the violence she embodies. On one hand she disregards the acts of violence caused by the terrorists because she is aware of the mental and physical destruction that such acts bring upon. But on the other hand she has no qualms with violence as long as it is in the cause of what she sees as justice.

Thankfully, life resumes for the narrator after the disastrous night at the whorehouse. Her mornings begin with a walk around the market where she feeds the peels of the stolen bananas that she has consumed to the cows near the municipal dustbins. She is concerned about the white bull and feeds it six fresh bananas of best quality. It reminds her of the majestic Nandi. The narrator tries to draw connections with the religious world in order to create a world of her own that is not orthodox, a world in which Nandi too is easily accessible to all.

The climax of the autobiography talks about the casual sexual encounters that the narrator has with a number of women of various cultures and communities but preferably of high economic classes. While she fulfills their sexual appetite with her seductive abilities, their jewellery or part of accessories gratify her as well. She admits that such encounters have their advantages as they are her valuable clients. She proudly announces, "I have stopped counting the number of begum

sahibas and chhoti bahus and rakhi behens and mrs major-generals I have made happy. Let me tell you, I remember each nasheeli gulbadan, each nazuk fasal-e-bahar!" (Roshanabadi 282).

In fact, she seems to be getting adventurous at times. One such occasion is when the husband of one of the clients wakes up from sleep while the wife is busy making out with the narrator but the latter somehow manages to escape. The fact that all the women who sleep with her are married, further asserts the hypocrisy of the institution of heterosexual marriage where the couple pretend to be blissfully together, yet there exist levels of discripancies between them.

The protagonist draws curtains to her tale rather coyly in the form of a direct chat with her readers saying, "So – such is the qissa of my kahani." (Roshanabadi 283). The story does not draw on any identity politics. Neither does the narrator seem to be apologetic about how she behaves or how she is. She proudly claims to be truthful to her nature and her story seems to authenticate the events of her life. She says:

> ...I must have become your very favourite chutiya nacheez, nothing more, nothing less. With a final back-bending, waist-bowing, floor-sweeping kathak-dancer tasleem, I will now request ijaazat. By moonlight or sunlight or the light of the leftover Diwali diya, with or without kajal, I am not the lie that I was born as, nor the illusion into which I have been carved. I am the fire that cools, the water that burns, the truth that blinds the liquid mirror of naked eye. Look behind and you may see me following you, like the hunger of orphans, the stare of zoo animals, the smell of poor people. I have no choice but to be faithful to my nature. All your mothers must have warned you that a tick on the udder of a cow never sucks milk, always blood. (Roshanabadi 283).

The narrator calls her story a 'qissa' meaning an incident or event thus considering her life as a series of various episodes.

The tale ends with a startling conception of the non-heteronormative subject. Non-normative sexuality always has to speak the language of the norm to point to itself but as the repressed self of that norm. It cannot see itself, it is a shadowy presence, haunting the norm. Through her breathless narrative that thins heterosexual cultural registers by virtue of the speed with which they are employed, Qamar Roshanabadi gives the same-sex subject in India presence – as blood-sucking tick, as the blinding light in the mirror of the heterosexual eye.

The notion of the 'Complete Works' that she initially titles her tale as, depicts the various moments of her life before and after the surgery she undergoes. A complete work constitutes a range of incidents that form the larger narrative and she successfully provides a variety of experiences to construct her entire life-story. By the end of her storytelling, she is confident of her readership hence almost flirtatiously invites her readers into her life-story, as if they no longer remain the mute spectators but become active witnesses of the events of her life. The language she uses in the concluding section is predominantly Urdu-Arabic instead of the usual mix of Urdu and Hindi. Such a strategy can be seen as a deliberate effort on the part of the narrator to sound more artistically composed.

The influence of Hindi films is a significant marker in the entire narrative. The narrator is a diehard fan of this visual culture and makes her obsession quite obvious. From the cardboard moon in the romantic sequences of these movies to imitating the main character of 'Ajeeb Ashiq,'[62] she makes her cinematic experiences come to life through her storytelling. In a way, she makes fun of the hero, Ajeeb Ashiq saying, "You tell me how this chutiya became a hero, with a face uglier than the inside of a crocodile's mouth," (Roshanabadi 271) but attempts to take after him time and again. She is attracted to the character's persona. She confesses, "...I passed a rack of stainless steel thalis, and I was just going to pose in front of the largest one and comb my hair with my fingers like Ajeeb Ashiq." (Roshanabadi 274). During the first encounter with 'Raat ki Rani' she totally plays the character of the hero as she tries to woe 'the lady' with antics like his. Moreover, her choice of programmes on the radio comprise numerous popular Hindi film songs like 'Chaudvin ka Chand', 'Choli ke Peechhey' and dialogues from these movies actually become statements in her real life.

The narrator in the final segment establishes her identity by negation, by aligning with the anti-truth as she announces that she is no more of what she was born as owing to the mastectomy, nor does she completely adhere to the notions of masculinity. She identifies with 'the hunger of the orphans', the helpless stare of the animals at the zoo, which are caged and lose their freedom, as well as with the smell of poverty-stricken people, all of whom belong to the space of the disenfranchised. In a way she does reinstate her position of marginality in the heterosexual society but accepts being faithful to the very nature of her being. Her story becomes remarkable

[62] Literally means 'a weird lover'.

since she continues her yearning to become a man for which she takes the appropriate medical steps, yet does not completely wish to fit into the domain where men inflict their power by repressing women. By calling herself 'chutiya nacheez' she refers to her gradual process of attaining malehood, but the process is not complete. She loves women like a man, lives amongst hijras, who are men but live as women and hence share a common bond of mixed identities as well as ostracization from the rest of the society. The ultimate comment about the 'tick on the udder of the cow sucking blood' probably hints at herself as progeny which is not heterosexual in its orientation. 'Nature' is evoked in the very undercutting of nature that is being conducted throughout the text.

Therefore Roshanabadi's narrative manages to come closest to the Indian definition of the queer (as discussed in the Introduction) in its sociological complexity, ideological subversions and its creation of a truly heterogeneous universe. The narrator-protagonist in her very being and in her life choices portrays a contradiction to the heteronormative scheme of things. She resides within this world of diversities and uses the very heterogeneities to create a compatible space for her queer experiences. Whether it is the name she takes up for narrating her tale or the surgery she undergoes to become a little more like how she wants herself to be or her numerous sexual encounters with women, s/he constantly challenges the conventional structures established by the society. The nature of her perceptions, ideologies and interactions make her a truly remarkable 'queer' protagonist.

Chapter 4

Queer hauntings in the fiction of Parvati Sharma

Parvati Sharma's *The Dead Camel and Other Stories of Love,*[63] published in 2010, is arguably the first collection of queer stories by an Indian author, though it was not announced as such.[64] The collection comprises of twelve short stories, each of which talk about the various shades of human relationships. As the title of the book suggests, they all deal with love in different spaces, amongst varied people and even in the most unpredictable circumstances. What is unique about the collection is that nowhere it is openly stated that these are lesbian stories. Nor does the author's description hint that she might belong to the community. The term 'lesbian' is totally absent from the text. The reason behind such an attempt might be that the use of specific terms like 'lesbian' or 'gay' tends to limit the boundaries of experiences of the individuals concerned. In that case, the subtlety of Sharma's narratives would have been lost. Moreover the entire concept of queer politics is post-identity, which clearly states that it comprises of subjectivities that go beyond the realm of LGBT experiences as well. Therefore it seems fitting to not spell out the experiences as primarily 'lesbian' only.

It seems that the author creates a world where homosexuality is as viable an option as heterosexuality quite different from the contemporary Indian scenario. It seems like a wish-fulfillment project for Sharma where she can portray lesbianism as something that is not a social stigma but equally it may be true of the class from which Sharma comes and of which she writes about. Nevertheless, Sharma is very observant as an author and manages to capture even the minutest details that build complex emotional maps in each of the stories if often at the expense of sociological maps in which these stories are located. All her characters are complex and layered even as they do not seem to be affected as gay people actually are in our homophobic

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[63] Sharma, Parvati. *The Dead Camel and Other Stories of Love*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2010. Print.

[64] In an interview to Express Buzz of *The New Indian Express*, dated 22nd September, 2010, on being asked whether it was a conscious effort on her and her publisher's part not to directly say aloud that her stories were gay similar to her sexual identity, Parvati Sharma replied, "If I've understood this question correctly, it has more to do with the book's packaging than its content. That's not really my strength: I tend to freeze at the idea of taking conscious decisions about projecting what my stories are, or what I am. As far as Zubaan is concerned, we never discussed selling the stories (or me) through a specific identity, sexual or otherwise. So the answer's no."

society. The discourses of caste, class, politics, religion, gender and sexuality are brought in but often so subtly so as to be almost unrecognizable.

This chapter will attempt to delve deep into three major stories from Parvati Sharma's collection to analyse how this strange world is managed and will ask what they tell us about queer culture in contemporary India particularly the place of lesbians or same-sex loving women in it.

Re: Elections, 2004

This story interweaves the lives of two lesbian lovers with the elections in Delhi in the year 2004. It intertwines the seemingly private love stories of the central protagonist with an earlier Muslim woman lover and her current Hindu woman lover with the very public and political exercise of casting votes by a wide variety of actors across class, caste and region.

The story begins with the narrator Meera, giving a description of her own character as someone who does not really follow her instincts and does not believe in giving brief answers to queries. This is a notion that gets undercut in the course of the story but it seems that the narrator attempts to build a case for herself. She accepts her tendency of taking hurried decisions that have proved to be wrong in most cases only because she did not pay heed to her innermost feelings. She announces:

> What this means is that although I give the impression of being deliberate and measured, in fact I rush headlong from glimmer to fade with a recklessness usually – and perhaps erroneously – associated with far more forceful characters. (Sharma 3-4).

She is a journalist by profession who has quit her job and is living in Delhi. She establishes herself as an honest, courageous, out lesbian who was in a relationship earlier with a Muslim woman and presently residing with her Hindu partner. She says:

> It's been six years since I met Fatima, five since she told me not to call unless somebody died, four since someone did and I hung up feeling flimsy and cheap. Three since I came out to my parents, two since I quit my job and one since I started living together with Monica. (Sharma 4).

She seems to be constantly reminded of her ex-lover Fatima who she is still in contact with through the occasional mail. There is a recurring dream in which Meera finds herself facing Fatima in a game that eerily resembles a sort of communal riot where they are on the opposite

sides and shooting at each other. Though it is a children's game, possibly *chor-police*, Meera realises that her opposition is firing real bullets due to which she loses her team mates. The blood oozing out of the wounded bodies cause her trouble. To Meera, this dream has an inner meaning, almost as if it is the explanation behind the varied emotional states of her life. The narrator invokes Fatima's importance by recalling again and again, something that she said:

> before any further communication with you, I must know who you voted for.
>
> F. (Sharma 4).

One can see the remnants of political consciousness in the childhood dream. The tension between the two religious heads, Hindus and Muslims, get denoted by the bullets fired towards each other. The realm of fantasy then constitutes the truth of the contemporary Indian society which is rife with communalism. It also highlights the desires, vulnerabilities and longing of the narrator in the recollection of the ex-lover whom she has not yet forgotten and who remains tied to her consciousness even when she is physically not around. It is as if the essence of the lovers' relationship depends upon their respective political inclinations and religious affiliations.

The narrator's partner Monica is a non-believer in Indian politics and is more vocal about her opinions than the protagonist-narrator. For her, none of the political parties hold any potential for doing any good to the masses so the entire idea of voting for a particular party for the betterment of the country in a democratic structure is a waste of time and effort. Not only does she attempt to discourage the narrator from voting in the upcoming elections, her arguments actually have the potential of raising doubts on the grim situation of Indian politics as a whole. She asks:

> 'Why vote at all?' because participating in the so-called universally 'good' but in fact Euro-Christian-Enlightenment-centric democratic process means reinforcing a merely plastic nation-state, and bad-mouthing all the economic liberalization in the world comes to nothing if we simultaneously accept this one most binding export – the only one kind of political organisation fits all.
>
> "Democracy can't work for us," she says..."We don't know how to work as a nation, except superficially: that isn't our *tradition.*" (Sharma 5).

Her ideas about a political nation are quite radical and she does not believe in the concept of national integration. Instead of having a central Parliament, she prefers a 'confederation of

villages' that would function independently without interfering into this whole drama of geographical or communal unity. The narrator does not really agree with her partner's political views and she confesses that it is due to such attitudes of the younger generation that they seem to be so ignorant of the political state of affairs of the country. Though she herself is not very confident of her political priorities, at least she acknowledges her hesitance. Therefore, politics is a significant marker in the story as each and every character whether in its acceptance or denial, praise or in condemnation, does engage with this phenomenon.

Politics is very much a part of people's daily lives. From the newspapers in the morning to the evening television programmes, any political propaganda before a major election is a predictable sight. The various forms of media contribute to the sensationalising of the event by numerous speculations which may or may not hold true but surely facilitate debates in public fora as well as in the minds of the people. Going through one such newspaper, the narrator observes:

> ...having touted the incumbent BJP's victory for months, it now carried reports of a probable Congress come-back. What had gone wrong, its columns speculated – and most concluded, apologetically, sheepishly, then righteously, that something had gone right. That real India had voted; the India Shining constantly advertised by the ruling party's campaign had stayed at home, comfortably assuming that the people who drove their cars and walked their dogs could also cast their votes. (Sharma 6).

The particular incident describes how on the morning of a day of election in Delhi, Meera and Monica are visited by their landlord and his wife who are on their way to casting their votes. Friendly and concerned, they insist on the girls joining them for the same, as if it was some ritual and presuming a common politics. While the narrator due to her adjusting nature bears the brunt of her dear landlady's occasional whims and fancies, her partner somehow manages to save herself and escape. "They are fond of me, and I of them, though they mistrust Monica for her too loud laugh and hardened negotiating skills," (Sharma 6) she remarks.

In describing the elderly Punjabi couple, the narrator analyses her own relationship with them. In addition to residing as paying guests in their home, she has an emotional connection with the landlady however comically she tries to portray it. It is a typical Indian middle class/Delhi scenario where the landlady's children are settled in far-distanced places and she gives some

residential space on rent to the two girls. Not only it is a financial support for the couple, the youngsters kind of fill the gap left by the absence of their sons.

So the lady is extra affectionate towards the narrator and has her own ways of expressing it. She invites them for lunches on Sundays, sometimes to watch a particular episode of some serial on television, on occasional walks to the gurudwara, even at times getting dinner home-delivered with cold drinks and ice-cream. Gossiping with the narrator is her way of overcoming the loneliness she feels due to the unavailability of her own children. The narrator is the 'listener, comforter' to her Aunty. The narrator humours her by saying:

> I didn't mind usually; I like old women and their nervousness, I like it especially when they forget and laugh – there is nothing less restrained and more helpless. (Sharma 7).

What becomes more and more clear with the progression of such small episodes is the dissonance between the two lovers, Meera and Monica. Their political ideologies do not match. Monica is less amiable in her behaviour towards the old couple and hence appears rude at times – all of which already hints at a certain lack of adjustment between the two. So even when Monica makes a random comment like, "Oh god, Meera! You and your Aunty – it's like I have a mother-in –law already," (Sharma 8) the narrator takes offence.

However, Meera is unable to vote since she was late in registering her name on the voters' list. But she accompanies Aunty and observes how insistent she is on voting for the party she feels is appropriate. She enquires even of the female janitor in whose favour she has cast her valuable vote and is disappointed to know that it is not for the party she supports and had expected the janitor to support. Later, she tries to convince the guard, Mohanlal, on how "Lotus is the right party." (Sharma 9). Political involvement of an individual is one of the major agendas in a country like India. So the preference for the BJP over any other political party is not just a matter of choice but also a matter of faith for this elderly couple, given that they are Sikh and have not recovered from the violence against their community by the Congress party in 1984, a party they will never vote for again. The narrator accepts that the situation is quite similar to her own family where her grandparents are also the supporters of BJP owing to the violence her community faced at the time of the Partition against the Muslims for which they also hold the Congress

responsible. Her parents too blame the Congress for the communal riots of 1984 which suggests her own family may be Sikh or Punjabi.

On returning from the voting arena, Monica joins the group for a brief tea session. Probably with the intention of making up for her rude behaviour earlier in the day, she brings along some *dhokla* for everybody to eat and the narrator soon finds her helping and bonding with the landlady. A friendly conversation begins and as expected it gets diverted to the topic of the day's voting. The elderly couple express their surprise and the fact that both Kanti and Mohanlal were supporters of Congress and had let them down.

Though the narrator would have also cast her vote in favour of 'the Hand' and not 'the Lotus', she does not wish to make her choice public, especially after being aware of the company she is in. But her beloved, being the dynamic one, literally puts words into her mouth even when it is not desirable. The more the narrator avoids entering the sensitive domain of discussion, Monica leads her towards the danger zone which she addresses as "this black hole of irretrievable conclusions." (Sharma 11).

The narrator is completely embarrassed by her lover's outspokenness and in trying to behave soberly thinks to herself, "When we make love I feel laughter and shivers of applause but, sometimes, Monica can also be a real cunt." (Sharma 11). Such feelings further reinstate the growing discrepancy in their relationship that will eventually get aggravated. Initially everything seems to be fine, as Aunty is at her gullible best. But the situation goes beyond control when on Monica's instigation, Meera finally makes a stray comment on the political choice of an individual and infuriates her landlord:

> So now I say, "Oho Aunty, after all they both only kill people, just sometimes one is more efficient than the other."
>
> Uncle reacts first banging the pink melaware plate on the table so Aunty jumps a little in her seat and her eyes grow round. "Really!" he says, "Really! You people all speak without thinking and this is the result." He stands up and looks at me, "Read something first! On your wonderful," he pauses and I wonder if I should stand up too, "on your wonderful internet!"
>
> "I .. "

> "Please, I do not want to have this useless discussion. This is enough."
>
> He knocks a small table over on his way to their bedroom and turns on the T.V. I try again with Aunty. (Sharma 12).

The couple's anger and disagreement with the youngster's comment comes from the memory of the experiences they had undergone in 1984. They are reminded of the times of the communal pogrom against the Sikhs of 1984 when the Sikh community in Delhi was literally hacked to death and people had to hide in places to save themselves from getting killed over the assassination of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards.[65] It was a rather difficult time when they had to erase the symbols of their own religious and communal identity in order to survive. Such events reiterate the fact that any pogrom is not just a political act. It has deeper emotional implications too.

The old landlady narrates their bygone days of horror and suffering, when they had to give up their pride, which is their very essence of being. They had to only think of ways to avoid getting executed. As she reminisces, she says:

> "But those days...all of us were beggars, praying, requesting all our neighbours and friends. Your Uncle, he wanted to go and fight. He said we'll show them the strength of our blood, but I begged, more than everyone, I pleaded with him to stay safe. For the sake of the boys." (Sharma 13).

There is a difference of opinions regarding the political affairs of the country and time plays a crucial role in the formation of such perspectives. While the older generation, like that of the Aunty-Uncle, who had been eye-witnesses of the homicide caused due to a wrong decision by the then ruling political party (Congress), the narrator's generation focused on the other massacre, the Godhra incident at Gujarat that was caused due to the opposition (BJP). Therefore the turmoil between the past and the present ceases to end since the heinous acts of the past continue to rankle the present and invoke varied reactions from varied groups of people.

[65] The background of Mrs. Indira Gandhi's assassination is the famous 'Operation Blue Star' that took place in June 1984 at the Golden Temple of Amritsar. It was an operation taken up by the Indian military on the orders of Mrs. Gandhi, the then prime minister of the country, to remove the Sikh insurgents who had taken refuge inside the temple. The Indian army had extensively used tanks and armoured vehicles to capture the hidden separatists. Though militarily successful, this operation went on to create a lot of controversy owing to number of civilian lives lost and the massive massacre of the sacred religious properties.

Probably, this debate has no point of termination, so the discussion also ends on an abrupt note with no concrete conclusion.

Meera and Monica share a relationship that has its ups and downs. Just as they fulfill each others love, they cause each other humiliation too. Like in this case, which, according to Meera could have been easily avoided had her beloved not tried to make an extra point. Monica's unexpected behaviour causes her pain and infuriates her as she comments:

> "I was sitting there nodding peacefully until you brought up who I was going to vote for; I mean, god, if you care that much, you could have smiled sweetly yourself couldn't you and said "No Aunty, actually *I* would never vote for the BJP because under my not-too-deep veneer of secularism-is-a-theoretical-import sophistication, I have a heart that buckles at the thought of religious government." (Sharma 14).

The lack of communication reaches its zenith with this episode; the political discussion had exposed the personal turmoil between the lovers. There is an emotional struggle between them and the present moment makes it seem as if there is no cure to this friction in their line of communication. Though Monica attempts to normalise things by planting a kiss on the narrator's cheek and saying, "Don't sulk baby, it's not your fault," the latter rather angrily pulls away saying, "I know...It's yours." (Sharma 14). The hurt and agony gets transformed into action as Meera rushes out to a nearby internet café to send her ex-lover, Fatima, about whom she had totally forgotten, belated birthday wishes. The lover's tiff reminds her to reach out for that love which she was forced to forget.

When the heart is heavy, memories seem to pinch all the more. She writes an e-mail to Fatima conveying greetings and informing her about the local scenario on the day of the polls. She remembers how Fatima used to lovingly tease her and the nights they spent together. Her heart longs for the lost love though she is aware of its impossibility.

Later on, though the lover's tiff resolves, Meera starts doubting the intensity of their affection and wonders whether it has undergone changes over the course of the year that they have been together. As she gapes at the computer screen trying to write, her mind is engaged in deciphering the fate of the present relationship under the shadows of the previous love. At night, she tries making love to Monica, almost thrusts herself into her nightie, but in vain. The unsuccessful

attempt at having sex destroys the last resort of this relationship as the narrator pulls back saying, "...if I don't acknowledge her tears, they will dry up soon enough." (Sharma 16).

Meera dreams again. She sees that the war is nearly over, the only remaining ones being Fatima and herself. She finds Fatima in one of the cupboards kissing a little boy. Fatima turns and points out her two-fingered gun. She shoots at the narrator wanting her to die. The latter tries to explain how she cannot die inspite of the real bullets since she has missed her shots, but Fatima does not understand. "I got you," she says, "You should die now." Before she can explain herself, Fatima leaves along with her father and the narrator is only left to say, "You know I love you." (Sharma 16).

The significance of the recurring dream clearly indicates the love that the narrator is associated with in her past as well as in the present. Whether it was Fatima or Monica, the narrator craves for love, the love served by her lover. But both the times the love seems to end on the part of the lover, leaving the narrator lingering on. The last phase of the dream highlights Fatima's options of attaining love from heterosexual sources as depicted by the little boy she kisses. The father is the authoritative figure who takes Fatima away from the narrator's lesbian love. Fatima calls her a "Cheater" almost putting the blame of their unsuccessful relationship on Meera, as the latter stands helplessly to watch her love go away forever. The only consolation for Meera in her love relationships can be said to be the acknowledgement of her true feelings towards her lover. As she confesses her love to the little Fatima in her dream, her grown up voice replies, "I know."(Sharma 16).

The meta author, Parvati Sharma, uses the dream sequence to great effect in this story. It is an interesting intermingling of the real and the deeply psychic that portrays the difficult realms of lesbian love in the inter-religious Hindu-Muslim context. The narrative is otherwise quite vocally charged up with the numerous political discussions with regard to the landlords but there is a conspicuous, almost deliberate silence towards the lesbian relationship between the girls, something that cannot be spoken about in the company of the elderly couple.

The Dead Camel

The story opens on a cold Delhi morning when, on the way to work in an auto, the narrator witnesses one of the strangest sights ever on the busy streets of Delhi. She sees a dead camel lying stretched across the road with its long neck over the divider. The sight compelled the auto-driver to slow down so that he could also have a better look, as the narrator stuck out her head to stare at it till she moved farther away from the spot. The sight of smaller animals like frogs, lizards, rats, even birds and dogs squashed on the middle of the roads, crushed under crowded feet or vehicles is a common affair, but this sight appeared rather unusual and left an indelible mark on the narrator's memory.

The narrator agrees that the sight was surely strange and even though she wanted to express her surprise to the driver, she realises that their earlier negotiations on the fare had left no option for any other conversation. Moreover, owing to the biting cold, both of them had mufflers wrapped around their faces. Even at her office, she wants to talk about the episode that she has witnessed but the Monday working atmosphere dampens her expressive spirit further. She comments, "Had it been a Thursday, when people are more accepting of their fate, buoyed by anticipation, I might have said something." (Sharma 18). The busy office schedule however makes the narrator forget this episode soon after but once back home and trying to sleep, the memory of the camel keeps bothering her. She recalls:

> The picture was so vivid that I lingered by its side for a long time until, at the moment I fell asleep, I was reaching out to stroke its forehead. Its dust-yellow hair was rough like unwashed carpet under my fingers. I woke the next morning with the pillow cradled in my arms. (Sharma 18).

The winter months at Delhi are unusually cold and the narrator tells about her experience in combating the excessive cold along with the hectic work routine. She narrates how she covers herself in socks, sweater and woollen cap even in bed and enjoys the hot shower in the morning before leaving for office in the pale white light due to the fog. People at the office are infected with coughs and sneezes. Though one can see the sun in the sky during afternoon, it is rather weak and goes down even before the evening can properly set in. By the time the narrator finishes her work to return home, the night is jet-black again. The headlights of vehicles on the street and sitting around the heater with glasses of rum back home seem to be the only saving

grace. This information actually provides an insight into the life of the narrator, establishing her as a usual middle class single working woman in the city of Delhi.[66]

Like a lot of young professionals in a metropolitan city, the narrator was living with two of her friends, Hamir and Madan in a *barsati*.[67] They had a pretty simple life which was dominated by their respective jobs but also had its moments of social gathering, one such memorable episode being the narrator's birthday party that her friends arranged for her. A lot of people came as there was food, alcohol and dancing to keep everyone entertained. They engaged in varied discussions and the narrator made a wish to have a peaceful settled life with someone special as she blew the candles on the cake of her thirtieth birthday. "What I wished for, very sincerely, was to settle down, to have someone, something, a flat in Gurgaon even, to protect me from the cold." (Sharma 19). The narrator's wish of being with someone is a consequence of her anxiety of being left alone in life. Her longing to be wanted and her want to own a secure future with a residence shows her desire to enter the next phase of life after bachelorhood.

The narrator meets her girlfriend, a girl much younger to her, and Hamir's friend from JNU, at one such gathering and instantly finds her enchanting. The friend in turn finds the prospect of the narrator's job exciting as she herself wishes to complete her education to get employed. The narrator finds herself getting mesmerised by her dark eyes. Even amidst the crowd of people discussing multiple issues from Arundhati Roy to Dalit rights, her silence seems to find a voice in the narrator's, as the latter finally manages to ask her for a drink.

A glimpse into the conversation taking place gives an idea of the variety of topics that get covered in the course of a discussion. It is an intellectual exercise amongst the educated masses that helps in gaining information. Someone claims to like the writing style of Arundhati Roy, but makes a distinction between her writing as a novelist and as an activist, since the latter focuses upon rights primarily. The discussion takes a turn towards the remarkable association of fiction with real life. Notable issues like whether the form of writing is more important than the content are also debated upon.

[66] Brinda Bose in her article titled "The Quilt is not the Closet," a review of Parvati Sharma's book, that appeared in *Biblio:* xvi (January-February 2011) actually mistakes the sex/gender of the protagonist and discusses it as a heterosexual love story.

[67] It is a small rooftop room or a small apartment on the top floor of a house. It is a common form of accommodation in metropolitan cities especially in Delhi.

A friendly conversation starts between the narrator and her new love interest, as the former makes a drink for her. She does not want to get drunk since she is the one driving back. She is young but a sensible girl with a sense of humour, all of which pleases the narrator to no end. She suggests the idea of going to the terrace with their drinks. It is a wintry evening as they stand outside in the freezing cold, talking and enjoying each others' company. The scenario is real but has a very stereotypical love story feel about it. One can almost guess what the next move would be and that goes on to associate the readers with the comments made earlier by the group of speakers in the conversation. The debate is as follows:

> "I don't think you can just separate fiction from real life," said another voice.
>
> "Of course you can," said a fourth. "Fiction is what real life isn't, otherwise all writing's just journalism." (Sharma 20).

In simple words, they bond over a cigarette, as the narrator asked for a drag and her cold fingers touched hers for the first time. She had mentioned her love for the cold weather and how it made her feel like dancing. The special moment arrives when both of them in their happy state of mind come closer and the narrator plants a kiss on her. She recollects:

> She hopped with me, hugging herself, delighted, "It's great isn't it? Don't tell me you don't love it."
>
> I shook my head, "Shh! Not so loud, they'll find us."
>
> She landed very close to me, almost on my shoes.
>
> So I kissed her. (Sharma 22).

This was the beginning of their love story. The kiss was followed by a passionate love-making session that continued over the weekend and the narrator missed her office too in the process. But the love-making was more pleasurable than she has imagined it to be.

> She crept across my body, took a bit of my belly in her mouth; I gave her a lingering lovebite on the left cheek of the bottom; she spread her legs and smiled and asked, "Aren't you coming?"; I pulled the quilt over us both.

> She came in rolls of silent thunder and in the afterglow of my orgasm I lay naked without the razai, for a moment self-sufficient. (Sharma 22).

However, the memory of the dead camel keeps recurring. The narrator sees herself standing beside the unattended camel and enquiring of a policeman if they would need a crane to carry the corpse away. She offers help and volunteers to sit with the body in the ambulance if need be. This dream depicts a state of mind that is supportive in nature and would come to aid in times of need. The strength and depth of the love they share is due to their sense of togetherness.

As the month of December arrives, everybody around the narrator makes preparations for new plans, like buying a new fridge or T.V or planning trips to beaches. The narrator's girlfriend too announces her trip to Bangalore with parents. She is taken aback with the sudden news and tries to get acclimatised to the forthcoming absence of her lover. Such are the pangs of love that her beloved too understands her sudden disappointment with the news and attempts to make amends. The family plans to visit her aunt at Bangalore and then travel to Hampi. The option of accompanying the family to Hampi does not seem feasible to the narrator in any case, irrespective of thinking of a number of excuses. So she drops the plan stating that, "It's been less than a month, I don't want to rush, I don't want to get too excited. I just want to keep this casual, you know?" (Sharma 23). Probably the narrator wants to weigh the pros and cons of their newly developing relationship but this statement leads to the lover's first fight.

Yet on the day of leaving for Bangalore, the girlfriend plans a meeting with the narrator and clearly expresses her love.

> "Yes!" she said. "I'm in love with you."
>
> ...Isn't it great? My first time! That's why I didn't realize what was happening, why I was feeling so happy and miserable all the time. But then, the minute I said, 'I'm in love' everything settled down. And I even," she laughed, "just before you came, I even googled it, to make sure, and I have *all* the symptoms."
>
> "You googled love symptoms?"
>
> "Yes," she laughed again. "You think that's stupid, don't you?" (Sharma 24).

The narrator's beloved as mentioned earlier is younger and it gets established with this conversation where the former is much more excited about the new experience and looks forward for an exciting future where she wants to try out numerous things which she had never done before. For her, the relationship is like a new beginning, a new phase of life with the one she loves, so she has a list of desires that she wishes to fulfill. She is a free-spirit who wants to go trekking, make a movie, learn to play the guitar, go for long drives, make love in water, buy a camera, but amidst all this she has a realistic dream of acquiring a job so that she can afford a *barsati* to stay in as the narrator. The adventurous spirit wants to also become financially independent and become capable of sharing responsibilities. The experienced narrator is calmer and finds her ways of love rather unique. She is certainly attracted towards her newness but cannot blindly believe in it. Their age gap also shows the difference in their trains of thought:

> "No, no, it's just new. In my time, I mean what I did was read *Love in the Time of Cholera*, but it's the same, the same end I guess."
>
> "Okay," she rolled her eyes, "in *my* time."
>
> I felt weak. (Sharma 25).

Even when the narrator finally goes to see her off and they wave at each other for the last time, the camel appears "cartoonishly squashed between the houses on either side of the lane." (Sharma 26). The narrator turns back with an intention of getting back home.

The writer uses elements of magic realism and the macabre (the reference to Marquez is not gratuitous) and brings in the camel from time to time in the narrative. The camel becomes the symbol of love for the narrator and gets invoked whenever she undergoes an emotional upheaval due to her relationship. It is the love that needs to be attended to by the lover. Thus when the lover goes physically away from the narrator, it gets manifested as the camel getting 'squashed between the houses' meaning its accidental death and also hinting towards a mishap in the love relationship.

The period of separation makes the narrator realize her love. She tries all means to wish her beloved on New Year and manages to do so. She proposes her young lover as soon as she arrives at the airport after the trip. They decide to get married after she had completed her masters

degree and when the narrator had enough money to afford a proper flat, though the girlfriend seems satisfied with the *barsati* only as long as they could stay together. As expected, both Hamir and Madan shift out to accommodate the couple in the *barsati,* an act that leaves the narrator feeling quite emotional and obliged at the same time. The three friends celebrate with real Scotch and recollection of the times spent together, both good and bad.

There is a constant mention of the change of seasons, probably highlighting the changes in the phases of relationship of the narrator with her girlfriend. While the winter season witnessed the blooming of a new relationship followed by a brief spring season, the arrival of the summer sees a series of disputes break out between the lovers. The couple had an otherwise blissful life along with the usual lovers' tiffs, followed by the patching-up sessions.

The vision of the camel becomes a constant feature and appears every time the couple reconciles after an argument. While making love, the "camel miraculously brought to life, struggling against traffic to get back on its feet," (Sharma 28) was the vision that kept on distracting her so much so that her girlfriend got offended. Unable to provide adequate explanation for her thoughts, she sounded guilty and the girlfriend mistook it for work pressure that totally disrupted the moment of love-making, as "the camel slumped." (Sharma 28).

Being powerful individuals, both have their own choices in life and preferences which did not always lead to mutual agreement. But the narrator agrees that they never created any scene in public, even if their fights were intense. The narrator was a calm person who preferred to stay indoors rather than going out every night and then waking up late next morning, something that the girlfriend enjoyed and did not always appreciate the lack of interest shown in it by the narrator. She detested the narrator's being in bed with the newspapers for too long on Sundays, considering it a waste of time. Again, her excessive love for stray animals makes the narrator uncomfortable. The sight of the dogs chained or caged in the animal shelter that she regularly visits makes the narrator feel jittery.

The constant mention of the age difference in the couple either jokingly or seriously by either partners at various junctures of the narrative, posits it as one of the major factors of their future disharmony. The frequency of their fights increases in due course of time and the emotional outbursts leave both of them unsettled:

She cried often and said she didn't believe I loved her. "I asked you to marry me, didn't I?"

"That's just nothing, just some *idea* you have, but it's not...I can feel it, you don't have any *passion* for me."

"For god's sake, what kind of *passion*, just because I don't do stunts..."

"I don't mean stunts, I don't mean anything dramatic, but you never do anything *nice* for me, nothing romantic."

"I thought I did lot of romantic things last night."

"Oh please, that's just like a *man*...all you want is sex."

"I thought you said I don't want sex enough?"

"You don't, not the right way."

"The right way?"

"Yes." (Sharma 30).

It seems that the very idea of love and love-making are different in the minds of these two individuals. Neither of them agrees with the other's perspectives and there are broad fissures creeping into their relationship. The former affection is withering away and charges of a lack of passion are thrust upon each other. The comment, 'that's just like a man...all you want is sex' for the first time in the story actually announces it to be a love relationship between two women. Simultaneously, it caricatures love-making between a man and a woman, where the former is interested only in the act disqualifying any space for emotional attachment, something that the latter is totally against. Also that the younger woman complains of the older one as wanting too much sex once again hints at the age gap between the lovers which creates the dichotomy in the way of expression of their love. The younger lover indulges in the more fairy-tale like romantic ventures, while the older woman believes in the real sexual exercise.

Their frequent fights manifest themselves in the narrator's dreams as the camel appears in the moments of their quarrel too. The narrator continues to imagine them arguing and screaming at each other in the middle of the street with the background of vehicles blowing horns and the engines making noises. The girlfriend trips over the creature's long legs and falls. The camel

thus gets associated with the narrator as a symbol representing the love of her life and these dreams function as assistance in resolving her greater problems. She admits, "From these dreams I always woke clear-headed and guilty; and it was inevitable, in this light, that what happened did." (Sharma 31).

The gap in the relationship was expanding as communication between them stiffened. Telephonic conversations also became impossible to continue. The condition worsened as she said. "I don't know what to do anymore," to which the narrator replied, "Fine, do what you like," (Sharma 31) and disconnected the phone. It seemed that the lover's tiff had crossed its very limits and there was no getting back to the original position. But it was the narrator's birthday that blew a deathblow to the relationship that she so wanted to take care of.

The girlfriend called up after few days of restraint to wish the narrator on her birthday. After conveying the greetings, she proposes that the birthday girl to join her at a place called Turquoise Cottage where she already was with a male friend, Sarvesh. The narrator is clearly disturbed to hear the friend's name and attempts to dissuade her to come and pick her up. The conversation ends with the narrator hinting at her irritation not because of the sudden plan but due to the company that her girlfriend keeps in the middle of the night. The pangs of jealousy and doubt gets emphasised at this point.

..."How will you pick me up?"

"Sarvesh has a car, he'll drive me."

"Who's?" I stopped. "It'll be closed by the time you get here and we get back. Forget it."

"I knew it!"

"What?"

"That you'll say no."

..."No. You have fun with Sarvesh or whoever."

..."Look, just let it be. Thanks for calling. I'm just tired, okay?" (Sharma 31-32).

The girlfriend attempts to make her beloved feel special as she does sense the unwanted distance that has developed in their relationship. She comes over to the narrator's residence only to celebrate her birthday, but the fact that Sarvesh ultimately drops her does not go well with the possessive lover. She brings a birthday cake that she had bought earlier but had no means to get delivered. The fact that she was with her friends all this while and had forgotten that the narrator's friends were not around hints at her depleting sense of concern. She simply says, "I know, I forgot somehow." (Sharma 32). The moment was quite right and the cake along with the flickering candle looked nice, but something about the manner of her girlfriend made the narrator see through her face of pretence. She could not but ask, "Something happened didn't it?" (Sharma 33). The question pricked like a knife as she hesitated with her replies. But the revelation had to follow as she ended up confessing the entire truth.

> "I'm sorry," she said. "It was just that I didn't know what was happening, and then I drank too much and..."
>
> I interrupted, "I've been drinking too much every night; my first impulse is not to go and *make out* with Sarvesh."
>
> "I didn't," she leaned back, sitting on her feet, "we didn't make out, it was just a kiss and then I told him I was *engaged* to you!"
>
> Despite the moment I laughed. (Sharma 33).

Drunk, her beloved had an intimate moment with a male friend and that leaves the narrator shattered. For the first time, she confesses to the association of the camel with her love. The camel that she saw unattended on the busy road of Delhi according to her could only be protected by her girlfriend, who is her lover, and this imagination had made her love her so much. But with the new man interfering in their romantic relationship, her imagination and the logic of it suffers a serious sense of betrayal. She claims:

> It's funny but I always imagined you, every time you wanted to save some injured cat or bird, I always imagined you hugging that great big yellow *truckload* in your arms to the nearest vet. You carried it for me. And I loved you for it. I *love* you for it. But I don't know, sometimes, I don't know if that makes sense, if the logic *fits*, if we're *true*, if we were, even, ever. But you, with your

> black ocean eyes, and you, with your broken smiles, if anyone could have *stopped* that auto, crossed that street, *stroked* that heavy jowl. (Sharma 34).

All the aspects that the narrator observed and mentioned about her beloved actually had facilitated to construct a certain image of the latter in her mind. The image which she had fallen in love with, that person who was the real saviour of the dead camel, that is their dying love, might have been the girlfriend. Her dreams come shattering down with the revelation that their relationship would not materialise further as she expresses her heartbreak quite distinctly. Although the metaphor of the camel is somewhat overdone by this point, as the concluding metaphor it regains the power of its first invocation and it maintains the precarious balance between the elements of the conscious and the subconscious in the narrative of 'love.'

The remarkable aspect of the story again is its pattern of narration. Parvati Sharma never for a moment moves away from the trajectory of heterosexual love. The episodes, the situations, the reactions, the consequences and the language – all fit into a stereotypical man-woman love relationship. But the writer beautifully puts the entire structure within a homosexual paradigm and portrays an equally engaging as well as emotionally charged love-story between two young women. What is even more interesting is the fact that this story can also be read as one between a lesbian and a queer woman. For the latter, the entire experience of being with another woman is an experiment, momentary in nature. But for the former, it is more a question of identity and permanence, hence the final tone of a heart break.

The Quilt

The story first appeared in a collection of fictional pieces called *Electric Feather: The Tranquebar Book of Erotic Stories* in 2009 edited by Ruchir Joshi. The title of the story owes allegiance to the narrative written by the legendary Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai in 1941 called '*Lihaf*' (The Quilt). It described a same-sex relationship between a feudal Begum and her lower caste/lower class maid behind the closed doors of the *zenana*.

Chughtai's story while it has become an iconic story for lesbian and gay critics in India is not explicit about the sexual activities, if its protagonists at all are homosexual, partly because its

narrator is a young child. Sharma's story, on the contrary, gives an explicit, rather graphic and detailed description, of the love-making between two women thereby amounting to a radical re-writing of that ur-text of same-sex desire between women. The names of the central characters are not mentioned and nothing specific is revealed regarding their whereabouts, except some of their physical features. The writer follows the strategy of maintaining anonymity with the character's identities as she mentions:

> ...Two women fucked under the covers. Of the women, one was tall and slender, she had intelligent features – a high brow, curious eyes, a strong chin, stuff like that – the other was overweight, unkempt, she had dull red pimples on her back and a playful tongue rolled up in her mouth. (Sharma 151).

The writer is very well aware of the reactions that such a bold story would invite and cheekily remarks in an aside, 'With apologies to Ismat Chughtai. I hope she would have been amused.' (Sharma 151). In a way she acknowledges Chughtai's brave act of writing such a piece during the troubled times of pre-independent India and also her wish to contribute to the domain by expanding the legacy of writing about same-sex relationships. She agrees that the story is a play of personal opinions and the expression of them.

The writer informs us that the couple in question owned a pet, a small, bright-eyed dachshund who loved chasing squirrels and sparrows, barking at the other dogs and unwanted strangers. The dog did not appreciate the cold which often led her to struggle in order to lie on the couple's bed at night after they had fallen asleep so that she could not be chased away. However, she was the silent listener to the women in the house when they were alone. The real motive behind the otherwise casual mention of the dog and its whereabouts is that it becomes a metaphor for the desire between women hitherto hidden in the Indian literary landscape.

Unlike the regular scheme of things, one cold night when the women were busy having sex, the dog quietly crept into the quilt on their bed. The quilt, like the one in Ismat Chughtai's story, acquires much importance here. The dog in its attempt to fend itself against the cold had cuddled up on the bed that night. But the sex of the women caused enormous disturbance and deprived the dachshund of the cover as it somehow managed to sleep. The next morning, the owners almost panicked unable to find their pet, only to discover it lying, later, on the corner of the quilt. This, being the background of the story, the narrative vividly depicts the entire act of making

love between the women at different moments, how they led to each others' orgasms and how, most interestingly, in between they discuss the various intricacies of Chughtai's tale making it a truly and literally intertextual tale.

The existence of such a story not only leads to a rather intellectual/literary critical conversation between the lesbians but it seems as if their entire act of love-making is based on the perspective of the original tale. An interesting combination of the intellectual and the physical is at play, both running in tandem with each other. There is absolutely no hesitation in the depiction of sex, unlike in Chughtai's story where the entire act is shrouded, kept under wraps and narrated from the perspective of an innocent, inexperienced child narrator. Here the description is raw and elaborate which makes it a creative piece of erotic writing.

> This is how they fucked: we are both under the quilt, naked, and I was flicking her clitoris with my tongue, enjoying my own swelling wetness when a thought struck me and I stopped. "You know," I rested my chin on the heel of my palm, "I was thinking."
>
> "Oh god, no." she said, "Must you?"
>
> "Well," I licked her labia, one by one, and let my tongue wander briefly inside. "I'm not letting you come for an hour – at least – so you should be grateful for something to pass the time with." (Sharma 152-153).

There is a lot of verbal communication happening between the lovers not just about the literary work but also about the act in which they are involved. A certain kind of ease flows between them and it seems as if the literary discussion is a part of their sexual intimacy. The body and the mind are brought at the same level as they try to explore both the dimensions and comprehend them. The narrator describes:

> I turned her over towards me and stretched my belly along her back and kissed the nape of her neck and took an earlobe in my mouth and I bit it. "That's no use," I said, "Never bring identity politics into a serious literary discussion unless you're deliberately inviting trouble." (Sharma 153).

The issue of 'bringing identity politics into literary discussion' is exactly the exercise that is being conducted through this narrative. Therefore, the statement is undercutting itself. Rather the involvement of identity into the arena of literature opens up a wide array of debates, the

discussion of which exposes new areas worth intellectual consideration. So in justifying the roles of Rabbo, the maid, and Begum Jaan, the feudal mistress, in the original story, the narrator explains the latter to be hormonally charged as she keeps shifting between the maid and the child narrator for deriving sexual pleasure. In the course of the discussion, they wonder whether it is adequate to call Chughtai's story a 'seminal' work on lesbian fiction.

Sharma's story depicts a narrator-protagonist who is equally obsessed with Chughtai's text and her lover's body at the same time. Though her beloved is the one who initially introduces her to the original tale, the latter gets more involved with the text. Even during making love its the narrator who begins the literary conversation much to the surprise of the lover who tries to look past but stands defeated after some time.

Humour plays a significant part in maintaining the easy flow of conversation between the two women as they make love. The humour too is a mix of the physical and the rational.

> She laughed into the pillow. "You Punjabi," she said, "It's Rubbo, not Rabbo."
>
> I extracted my hand and smacked her bottom. "You're clearly paying no attention," I said. "And you're making unreliable phonetic distinctions." (Sharma 154).

Several issues of concern regarding the original story come up in the course of their talk with each other. While the narrator's partner does not really consider 'The Quilt' to be a closet for the lesbian acts, the narrator thinks that the idea behind Chughtai's representation of these women was to highlight the consequences of the absence of heterosexual sex in women, as was the case of the Begum. Her husband was gay and preferred spending time with the '*churidar*-clad' young men who visited him rather than his beautiful wife. The partner defends her argument by bringing in the societal scenario of that time when announcing one's sexual orientation was anyway prohibited. 'The Quilt' therefore cannot be just regarded as a hide-out for their sexual acts, rather it was a protection from the unnecessary social rebuke:

> "It means," she said and I slid a nipple into my mouth, "Chughtai wasn't writing about dyke-y angst; the quilt wasn't what they hid their passionate attraction to each other under, it was all of suffocating society, it was privacy and privation and-"

> I slid downwards and plunged my tongue into her vagina as deep as it would go and rubbed her clitoris with my nose. She moaned little. I came out. "How about privilege? Etymological alliteration doesn't magically make you right, you know."..."And," I whispered into her lips, "it's about as enlightening as the Oedipus complex." (Sharma 155).

The 'plot' of this story may not be substantial enough but it acts as a tool to reveal the raw physicality of a lesbian relationship, how their feeling of love gets manifested into the sexual act that constitutes the entire narrative. The story also offers several critical insights into the original tale of "The Quilt", where the latter is judged on the basis of subjective and objective observations. The conversation facilitates a focus on the various historical figures and facts, like Saadat Hasan Manto, a close friend of Chughtai who supported her writings yet called her 'coy', is referred to; the actual Begum, an acquaintance of the great writer who was aware of the character based upon her persona, also finds mention; as does the casteism of the original Urdu story.

The discussion can be clearly described as a systematic debate between the lovers that constitutes arguments and counter-arguments. This intellectual stimulation makes the act of love-making more pleasurable and long-lasting. They bring in the issue of paedophilia, a grave modern-day concern, and attempt to justify that if the gay husband of the Begum was not a viable option for sexual pleasure then the latter could have indulged in the other young men around instead of victimising the child narrator which made her appear as someone obsessed with deriving sexual pleasure only. It also goes on to show that one of the women, that is the narrator herself, is someone who is highly conservative on the issue of child sexuality and does not see the paedophile as an excoriated ally. The narrator says:

> "You're just identifying. I told you already: that won't get us anywhere but trouble. Why'd she get off on a kid's ribs? That's just weird. Plus. To do justice to your previous point: it's not like her husband was depriving her so terribly. He was just a happy old queen who let her be. She could have enticed one of those boys he was screwing. Across her pardah." (Sharma 156).

The lovers playfully express their desire for each other and the analysis of the literary work almost becomes like a temptation to continue with their sexual act. The physical satisfaction thus obtained has its roots in intellectual gratification:

"Get inside me," she said, "I'll read you the Urdu original afterwards. It explains everything."

"You mean it's a bad translation? What you gave me?"

..."It's ludicrous," she said, "it should be banned."

..."God *yes*, really! The Urdu's got politically incorrect caste appellations and this creepy moment where Begum Jaan seems like vampire with weird skin – and it's a *horror* story, practically, wrapped inside an elaborate joke."

"Doesn't sound like much of a turn-on." I sat up. "Are you even in the mood any longer?" (Sharma 157).

The experience of reading the actual story determines the extent of pleasure derived through the sexual act. Chughtai's story is the real protagonist of this tale as her characters ultimately get transformed into Sharma's narrative. The sexual experience aligns itself with the literary and the literary gets incorporated into the physical act. The story comes full circle as the narrator lovingly addresses her partner as 'Begum Jaan' to which she coyly reciprocates. They pull back the quilt over themselves as they make love in its warmth and darkness.

Parvati Sharma has very artistically used Chughtai's story to depict her own fictional narrative. It is literally a rewriting of Chughtai's tale but engages in a severe undercutting of it as well. While Chughtai's prose unselfconsciously uses registers of caste and class, Sharma interrogates her sharply through one of her characters. Yet she herself hardly mentions any identity markers of class and caste for her characters. She can afford such kind of writing owing to her own upper middle class urban background but a complete absence of such registers in the Indian context make it seem distanced from ground realities. 'The Quilt' works as a powerful strategy to facilitate a modern day lesbian tale but unlike Chughtai's characters, Sharma's seem miraculously free from any pressing social moorings. The original story gets woven within this new tale and, in a way, the latter leads to a better understanding of the original. The narrative is dynamic and conversation-oriented. More than the authorial description, the plot develops through the dialogues of both the characters as they speak amongst themselves during their love-making session. Sharma presents a rather light-hearted erotic lesbian tale by undercutting the seriousness of Chughtai's narrative.

All the three stories present lesbian relationships interwoven with the discourses of politics and religion, even if not class and caste. This shows that 'queer' facilitates a certain kind of identity in the Indian context. It allows for the invocation of caste and class for others but not for the self. There is a certain myopia to the way the stories have been told in relation to the self or the narrator-protagonists. While the relationships in "Re: Elections,2004" and "The Dead Camel" fall prey to various socio-cultural as well as psychological turmoils and the couple in "The Quilt" blissfully make love along with a lively discussion between them, all the main women-loving protagonists seem miraculously relaxed about their own identities, their position in the world, even their sense of entitlement

In the above mentioned stories, 'queer' seems to be of a particular class, that is of the upper middle class in the Indian society. It is a class that believes in a certain kind of working culture, is in possession of a specific kind of education and follows a particular life pattern. Sharma herself inhabits this class without much self-reflexivity due to which the very existence of her characters seem distant from the actual societal reality at times that generally associates notions of taboo and ostracism to the queer community. However the portrayal of her lesbian characters is rather radical and yet seem to seamlessly get accommodated within the otherwise predominantly heterosexual world.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

> "Abnormal? What are you talking about? You think I'm a bloody lesbian, don't you? Well, guess what? You are wrong. And so are all of them who've been telling you that. I'm not a dyke. I'm not kinky. And I'm certainly not crazy. Don't ask me to explain it to you-but I'm in love with you."[68]

This was a conversation between the two central characters of Shobha De's novel, *Strange Obsession* on lesbian desire. The speaker, Minx is a butch lesbian in love with the beautiful model, Amrita, and this is her justification when the latter refuses to accept her proposal. A casual reading of the book and this point particularly gave rise to the entire concept of this dissertation on representation of lesbian love in Indian literature. The actual condition of a lesbian in the Indian society drives her to the extent of refusal of her own being as she denies association with her own lesbianism. The term 'lesbian' invariably derives a negative connotation as it is affiliated to excessive sexual passion or some sort of perversion. The emotion of love is immediately done away with and only the sexual action gets highlighted, that too not in good taste.

It is this dichotomy in the status of a lesbian woman as a 'normal' human being in her life and love choices and her representation as someone who is either in denial of herself or as scripted to be someone totally insensitive, diseased or psychopathic that opened up this area of debate regarding lesbian representation in Indian texts. To explore a lesbian subjectivity along with its various nuances in the rubric of the homophobic Indian context therefore constituted this project.

Though 'queer' has been used as an umbrella term to depict a number of identities that challenge the heteronormative order, the ambiguity of this term cannot be ignored. It is a term (as already mentioned in the Introduction) which is elusive. It claims to encompass many identities yet it might itself not have clear cut boundaries of recognition. Arvind Narrain has attempted to study the markers of queer identity in India vis-à-vis political notions and legal structures in addition to

[68] De, Shobha. *Strange Obsession*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992. 32-33. Print.

encompassing of the various socio-cultural elements. He states that "The word 'queer' also signifies a political understanding of the structural nature of oppression and willingness to take on board the variety of social struggles. The term arose in the context of a frustration with the lesbian and gay struggles that were increasingly moving to a liberal agenda,"[69] thus almost projecting 'queer' as a term that defies any intolerance and which resists appropriation by any sector of the mainstream.

In trying to explore the domain of 'queer' one comes across an interesting take by Linda Garber in her work, *Identity Poetics*,[70] where she traces a connection between the emergence of queer theory and the lesbian feminist movements that dominated the 1970s, by studying the intricacies of writings especially by the working class lesbians as well as the lesbians of color since queer theory has been considered to hold an intellectual elitist bias thus disregarding issues of class and race. Moreover queer theory favours a postmodern concept of identity that is against monolithic identity positions. Therefore identity becomes multi-layered. This multiplicity of the identity positions along with the simultaneous activist exercises, both constitute lesbian feminism, but somehow it has been blamed for being outdated and holding fixed notions of gender and sexuality. By highlighting that "around 1991, queer theory similarly ascended to a position of recognized institutional power, eclipsing earlier varieties of both Images of Lesbians criticism and lesbian-feminist political and critical theory which had gained some prominence within women's studies," (183) Garber's agenda is to do away with this division between lesbian feminism and queer theory. She gives importance to the historical charting of both the movements to establish a kind of continuity that justifies the co-mingling and interdependence between both the movements which she believes will show the limitations of queer theory and trace its lineage to its lesbian feminist predecessors.

In the analysis of the primary texts in the course of the dissertation, the representation of this distinct multiplicity of the queer/lesbian identity acquires utmost importance. I have tried to show how texts in English can capture this Indian same-sex/lesbian queerness.

[69] Narrain, Arvind. *Queer: Despised Sexuality, Law and Social Change*. Bangalore: Books for Change, 2004. 2. Print.

[70] Garber, Linda. *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. Print.

Qamar Roshanabadi in her fictional work manages to re constitute a typical South Asian lesbian subject from someone who is very much a product of the excesses of the various socio-cultural influences starting from religious events to practices to general notions regarding life into a subversive and fantasmatically excessive character who can be as conservative as she can be radical. Her protagonist's perceptions of the world in which she is located in as well as her interactions with various individuals around successfully constitute or embody the spirit of a queer character, as defined by Narrain and Bhan (as cited in the Introduction).

Parvati Sharma, on the other hand, shows a rather class specific nature of the lesbian/queer but even in her stories the elements of diversity of the society creeps into the formation of the middle-class queer individuals. She locates all her characters in the urban, upper middle class of the Indian society with a particular kind of educational and cultural background that helps to create a subjectivity which is not necessarily a victim to the numerous inhospitable circumstances of the society. The lesbian characters are never shown to confront any antagonistic situation making it seem as if there is no intolerance or oppression in their life.

But credit has to be given to her since, even after confining the characters within a particular class, she manages to show how other elements creep into that queer identity. In considering the individual stories, one can observe that the identities that she tries to pretend do not really exist haunt her characters at various moments. Issues concerning religious difference, communalism and the deafening silence on the sexuality of the lesbian couple on both their part as well as on the part of the landlords are brilliantly portrayed in "Re: Elections, 2004". An encompassing exploration into the generational difference in the notions of lesbian versus queer is depicted in "The Dead Camel." "The Quilt" provides a platform to an array of concerns like caste, paedophilia, the position of Ismat Chughtai as a writer of queer experiences in colonial Indian society, all of which is discussed quite artfully amongst two women making love. The most remarkable aspect about both Roshanabadi's and Sharma's depictions is that the lesbian desire does not fall prey to the stereotypical negative representations which need no excuse to either end in misery or in heterosexual companionship of one or both the partners, a kind of pattern followed in majority of the lesbian fiction written in Indian literature in the past two decades.

It also becomes relevant to consider the way in which popular culture and media represents the members of the queer community around us, where they are shown as characters of comic relief

or are mocked at, perhaps portrayed for sensationalism. Whether it is the gay couple in *Dostana* or the reactions of/to Kantaben in *Kal Ho Na Ho* even at the slightest 'imitation' of homosexuality by the central characters, all depict the lack of progress in the mental perceptions of the masses towards non-heterosexual identities.

The recent comment by the country's Union Minister for Health on homosexuality being a foreign disease and thereby holding MSM[71] responsible for the spread of HIV/AIDS did raise a number of eyebrows but it goes on to reinstate the lack of sensitivity towards the queer community. Such perceptions are just the tip of the larger iceberg of prejudices that calls for a resolution and hence the need for further interaction as well as free communication between the supposed heterosexual and homosexual divisions of the society.

Though it does remain an open-ended question as to whether it is possible to capture a true picture of the Indian/South Asian queer-specific writing (the larger question is what that trueness is). What I have tried is to demonstrate that there is richness and texture to some of this writing, both at the level of content and form (indeed the two are inseparable). Writing may be the best space where this kind of appropriation or negotiation with such identity politics is possible as it captures the psychic complexity and sociological nuance like no other form can.

This dissertation has made a small attempt to delve deep into the lesser known or rather obscurely represented domain of lesbian relationships in India which hold great potential for future research. With writers like Qamar Roshanabadi and Parvati Sharma, it can be easily said that there are marvelous possibilities in same-sex women/lesbian writing in India of realising the potential of 'queer' and it is a terrain waiting to be further explored by both writers and critics.

[71] It is the abbreviated form for 'men who have sex with men'. It is used particularly in HIV/AIDS advocacy work and social research for purpose of study of the group of male members who indulge in sex with other men, an act without considering issues of self-identification. Indeed, they most often identify as straight men but are most often married.

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