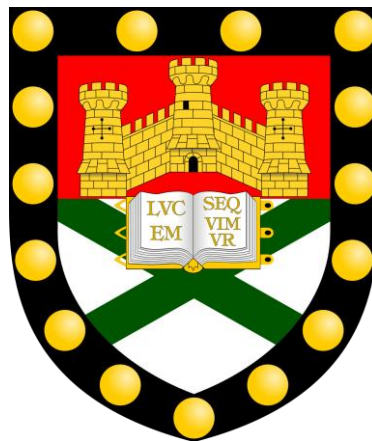


Forbidden Love: Invisibility and the Representation of Sexual and Emotional Repression in Queer Indian Literature and Film



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To the silenced, lost and unconsolated queer voices in India – I dedicate this to you.

Introduction

Queer literature is a well-known genre that has become widely studied due to the gradual acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights globally. For decades, India has restricted the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, though the campaign for rights in India particularly has been a longstanding feature expanding for decades. The campaign for queer rights hastened in the 1990s due to “growing awareness about AIDS ... [that] played a significant role in the creation of new NGOs” (Srivastava 374). This increased queer visibility led to the overturning of Section 377 in 2018, which saw certain sexual acts as “unnatural offences.” Introduced in 1861 by the British Empire and reinstated after Independence in 1947, Section 377 implied that the Indian system considered “perverse” sexual practices such as homosexuality as immoral, and needing monitorization. The overturning of this oppressive article allowed for queer sex and in turn romance, to be legalised within India. The 1947 reinstatement of Section 377 suggests that colonial western homophobic attitudes were successfully indoctrinated into certain spheres in India. As Pandey argues the “criminalisation of homosexuality was entirely a foreign concept” (BBC news), showing that in pre-Colonial India, sexual and gender fluidity was widely accepted. Homophobic attitudes shifted continually after the Ancient Indian period, yet punishments, until British incursion, were small scale. Colonialism thus had an unfavourable impact on queer and non-binary representation within India.

With this context outlined, I will assess the impact of post-colonial Indian queer literature and film in shaping India’s emerging queer discourse and plot the changing historical attitudes towards queerness. A central endeavour of this dissertation will be to assess how queer love and sexuality is expressed in these bodies of work. Many concepts of love will be discussed, such as romantic or familial agape, because queer marginalisation

means these communities lack varying forms of love. It will also be established how the LGBTQ+ community has found ways to express this love in a society that has denied them the right to emotional inclusion. I will mainly be focusing on queer/transgender women, as Indian discourse has largely ignored this group and focused on efforts to support queer men through healthcare support and more NGO groups catered towards this group's needs. All the works convey an intrinsic desire of the queer community, which is to feel love and acceptance, and use sexuality to express that love and destabilise heteronormative ideals that have constrained them. Indian queer scholars such as Rao, Vanita, and Reddy will be mentioned to assess these works along with secondary historical studies.

The first chapter titled "Male Homosexuality and Emerging Discourse" will consolidate how India has begun to address queer discourse and the impact that romantic/sexual expression and homosocial spaces has had on queer men. *Hostel Room 131* by R. Raj Rao will be used, which tells the story of two boys Siddharth, and Sudhir who fall in love and express their sexual desires in the homosocial space of a hostel room. This novel works well for this chapter as it correlates to concepts of sexual perversity and queer spacing that have helped shape queer discourse. *Mohanaswamy* by Vasudhendra, will also be used, which details Mohanaswamy's coming of age story in which he deals with ostracization for being a queer man in Kannada. This text is a localised story, providing the varying responses towards homosexuality in India on a regional scale. Homosocial culture in India and MSM's, meaning men-who-have-sex-with-men, will be mentioned to argue how masculine homosexuality, though still demonised, has some leverage in India compared to queer/Hijra women; visibility needs to be refocused on these other two communities.

The second chapter titled “Queer Women: The Rise of Lesbian Romantic Oppression” will examine the works titled *Fire*, an Indian film directed by Deepa Mehta, and *Kari*, a graphic novel by Amruta Patil. *Fire* tells the story of Sita and Radha who find love after their husbands neglect them. Radha’s husband, Ashok, has taken a vow of celibacy but uses her body to test his temptation, whereas Sita’s husband, Jatin, commits adultery. This film is significant in the movement towards queer rights in India and represents realistic lesbian erotica. The film sparked “lesbian groups... [that] organised themselves into a coalition called “Campaign for Lesbian Rights”” (Srivastava 375). *Kari* foretells the titled characters coming of age story as she navigates heteronormative society whilst accepting her sexuality and battling suicidal tendencies. This graphic novel provides a new medium for India to explore queer discourse and uniquely represents sexuality. These works are paramount in providing visibility to queer women who are marginalised, and showcases the passion and stability behind queer women’s romantic love.

The final chapter, “Hijras: Familial Violence and the Third Gender”, focuses on the complex culture of the Hijra/trans community and how this deeply marginalised group seeks to find familial love through child-rearing and creating families within their own community. The works being assessed will be *Tamanna* directed by Mahesh Bhatt and Arundhati Roy’s novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (TMOUH)*. *Tamanna* tells the biopic of a Hijra named Tikku who finds an abandoned baby girl, named Tamanna, and raises her to cope with the recent loss of his mother. The story depicts his continual sacrifice for Tamanna, supporting her in uncovering the truth over her abandonment, that being her father wanted her dead because she was a girl. *TMOUH* discusses how Anjum, a Hijra, navigated through India’s darkest moments in history. Both these texts are paramount as their narrative structure and dialogue allow for this silenced community's aggravations and desires to be heard. This is

the largest chapter, as this group is more deeply marginalised than queer women and men thus deserve greater attention and in turn visibility. Hijras experience a life so marginalised that stable relationships are a rarity, projecting a very lonely existence where they enact a social role as religious entertainers.

Chapter One

Male Homosexuality and Emerging Discourse

Many Indian academics have noted more is required for society to become tolerant of the LGBTQ+ community. The queer movement in India has been centralised on one oppressed group in the LGBTQ+ community, that being queer men. Focusing on male sexuality has meant other queer groups have been ignored, thus establishing the progress that has been made for queer men is paramount in showcasing how these improvements can be extended to queer/trans women. This chapter will briefly outline how literature and society has responded to male sexuality, and how this impacts homosexual love. *Hostel Room 131* and *Mohanaswamy* will be used to impart how homosexual love in India has been approached through the idea of homoeroticism and how homosocial spaces have allowed for this behaviour to occur.

Homosocial Spaces and MSM's

Indian customs around homosociality have paved the way for a common gay subculture within India. Rao supports this in his book of collected essays called *Criminal Love? Queer Theory, Culture, and Politics*, claiming, “what fosters the link, though, between patriarchy and latent homosexuality is homosociality”, and insinuates, “[homosociality] serves the interests of homosexuality by becoming its alibi...[therefore] the sight of men holding hands... on Indian streets is too commonplace to be commented on” (5). This highlights a cultural difference as masculine intimate friendships are deemed natural until they cross a sexual boundary. Two men holding hands down the street can be perceived as

homosexual in the West but normalised in India, creating a culture that secretly breeds homosexual tendencies. Evidence of this is shown throughout the two works where both writers reference the idea of a “yaar”, which is a title Indian males give to their close friend. Through this term, the main characters of each book can hide their illicit romance and use homosocial spaces, like a hostel room in Rao’s novel, to sexually express themselves. Indian patriarchal homosocial culture thus enables male sexual expression to occur.

Rao discusses MSM’s in *Criminal Love?* which, refers to “straight” married men who, “do not want to be referred to as ‘homosexual’ or gay even though they are attracted to people of their own sex” (3). MSM’s, therefore, lead a double life through existing within a marriage whilst actively seeking men. This exemplifies how the Indian patriarchal structure allows MSM/gay men to manoeuvre in a sexually discreet manner through their city space. *Mohanaswamy* showcases this through the portrayal of Kartik, who maintains homosexual relations with his lover Mohanaswamy, while simultaneously pursuing a relationship with his soon-to-be wife. Of course, queer men face danger from their heterosexual peers, but male privileges allow them to enact more sexually free compared to lesbians/Hijras. Furthermore, the provocative sexual nature of MSM’s has been correlated to the rise of AIDS in the gay community. Whence, many NGOs and organisations have focused their efforts on promoting support and discourse to queer men, neglecting other queer minorities. This conveys that within the LGBTQ+ community there are varying levels of oppression and an “exposition of margins within margins” (Chanana 57).

Homoeroticism and Romantic Love

In *Hostel Room 131* an intense homoerotic act is described, as Rao cites how “the meek Sudhir inherited Siddharth’s semen ... he did not realise that his own semen had discharged too. It lay there on the bed sheet in a little pool of white, like spilt milk, slowly seeping into the mattress” (41). Rao’s gratuitous depiction intends to shock the reader, as going into graphic detail educates readers on homosexual activities, thus, normalising this behaviour. Thereupon, Rao’s work (though gratuitous) does enlighten sexually unaware individuals on how homosexual sex is performed in a loving space. Thence, gratuity is necessary in queer Indian writing to uplift and destigmatise homosexual practices rather than replicate the homophobia heterosexual literary discourse subtly purports. Rao is therefore adopting a Foucauldian approach as Foucault claims that sex had to be controlled through “its free circulation in speech” (17). This further proves that perversity is needed in queer Indian literature to challenge heteropatriarchal discourse and challenge bourgeoisie social orders that govern sexuality. Globally, the language for homosexual exploits is still foundational, whereas heterosexual desire and love has had centuries to reform and assess its discourse due to heteronormative structures that have valorised heterosexual eroticism. Thereby homoerotic discourse in literature is revolutionary in further establishing gay rights and dismantling heteronormativity in India.

Similarly, *Mohanaswamy* also showcases queer love and desire through homoeroticism. As Mohanaswamy sees “two male bodies...rolling on the floor moaning in pleasure”, and how their erotic acts made him realise, “that he was not alone [that] there were others like him in the world” (73). The voyeurism that Mohanaswamy enacts showcases how homoeroticism can create a sense of relief and belonging. Homoeroticism allows individuals

to feel accepted and no longer reinforces this idea that they're an outsider. Thereby, homoeroticism is paramount in unifying the gay community in the normalcy of queer sexual acts.

Eroticism is a topic of anxiety for many queer individuals, as Vasudhendra alludes to a sexual encounter involving Mohanaswamy which turns into blackmail. As he questions, "Is this a plot by Kashiveera to get me caught? Will the newspapers publish stories about my heinous act?In India, the police will kick your ass and put you in jail if they get wind of it. If something goes wrong, what will happen to my life?" (87). The use of rhetorical questions and first-person narrative is powerful in manifesting the anxiety that the gay community can face when exploring their sexuality. It depicts a life lacking security from all factions, with the police corruption and media's scapegoating further alienating them. Murthy supports this, arguing that the book depicts "movement between sites of unfreedom" (80) leading to many men staying closeted in India to protect themselves from an all-oppressive state.

This section purports how male sexual activities can also be exploited, weaponised, and used as a tool of abuse towards gay men. Thus, homoeroticism is vital in portraying the power of love between two gay men in these texts, whilst also communicating the trauma that can formulate from gay sexual expression. Resultantly, both texts suggest that the ability to find queer love in India is almost impossible. Sex and love are arguably intrinsically linked, so when couples are targeted for sexual preferences, their experience of love ultimately becomes more negative. *Mohanaswamy* adds even greater cultural power, as it is a text written in Kannada and is translated into English, which as Prabhu states, "reaches out to the communities" (TheHindu.com), especially rural communities which are less educated around sexuality.

Overall, queer Indian discourse has begun to formulate around masculine queer sexuality, through the topics of homosocial space and homoerotic behaviour. Rao's essays voice how homosexual men can manoeuvre and protect themselves more freely than queer women/Hijras because patriarchy provides them with greater freedoms. Furthermore, a focus on homoeroticism further destabilises heteropatriarchal ideology, allowing the sexual behaviours of gay men to be normalised whilst further tightening this close-knit community. Finally, societal vilification of homoeroticism, which these books try and educate and challenge, impacts the character's capability to find stable relationships, and genuine forms of romantic love.

Chapter 2

Queer Women: The Rise of Lesbian Romantic Oppression

The previous chapter outlined India's vast discussions and improvements towards male queerness, henceforth the next chapters will draw attention to sections of the queer community in India that have been side-lined. "Chapter Two" highlights the perceptual changes towards queer women in Indian history and how colonial intervention paved the way for anti-lesbian rhetoric in neo-liberal India. Accordingly, writers challenge this rhetoric by focusing on the representation of romantic and sexual love between women. Arguably, the treatment that queer women face in India is more uncompromising compared to queer men as Indian archaic patriarchal structures have restricted women's mobility and sexual freedoms. Inevitably, if women desire to break away from the heteropatriarchal values of society, they will face greater stigmatisation than queer men. *Fire* and *Kari* will be utilised to argue how lesbian love/eroticism is challenged in India because it is the greatest physical challenge posed towards patriarchal doctrine. Ergo, to maintain this patriarchal order, lesbians face greater isolation and persecution that can lead to violence. Thus, India needs to embrace romantic and sexual relations between women to dismantle heteropatriarchal repression and promote egalitarianism.

Pre-colonialism and Lesbianism

Pre-colonial India was fairly accepting of homosexual and non-binary individuals as shown through the texts of the *Kama Sutra* and *Ramayana*. Vanita discusses these lesbian stories in her book, *Same-Sex Love in India*, asserting, "Aruna, god of dawn and charioteer of the sun, who takes on a female form in order to sneak into an all, female gathering where

women dance naked for each other's entertainment” (13). This designates a sense of religious acceptance towards lesbianism in Ancient India. The writer of the *Kama Sutra*, Vātsyāyana, also claimed that “women must study [the book] and younger women must be instructed by older more experienced women” (47) in sexual acts. Since the *Kama Sutra* was a text created to incorporate sexual practices to gain better internal harmony and emotional fulfilment in life, it implies that the non-heteronormative practices should be valorised if they provide benefits to the human and social experience. Women were seen as also needing to benefit from their sexual desires and the commonality of lesbian expression suggests that love/sex between women was normal, empowering, and a necessary part of the female experience in India.

These pre-colonial works promote the notion that intimacy between women was tolerated and even celebrated. This is paramount in delineating how post-colonial negative attitudes towards lesbianism stemmed from Eurocentric incursion into India, as lesbianism was recognised before this. Though it is accurate to assume that modern-day homophobia in India correlates to colonial indoctrination, lesbianism was not as widely accepted among lower castes. High caste privileges allowed these women to explore their sexuality more freely, therefore, though European settlement impacted gendered violence and queer relations, female sexuality was still governed beforehand. Post-colonial lesbian literature/films must work to attack caste and colonial attitudes towards female queer sexuality.

Colonialism, Section 377, and the Decline of Lesbian Writings

The aforementioned, Section 377, outlawed many “unnatural” sexual acts but specifically vilified “anal” sex between same-sex partners. This left lesbians in a limbo state, as their considered “nefarious” interactions did not involve “penetrative” behaviour. Rao, in *Criminal Love?*, argues this claiming, “Gay men resent the fact that Section 377 ... applies only to them and not to lesbians, considering that it is concerned with penetrative sex” (98). Queer women are rejected by heterosexuals and by members of the LGBTQ+ community, meaning they form an isolated group. Section 377 overlooking queer women’s sexual desires implies how queer women in colonial, and by extension, neoliberal society are seen as invisible. So, in modern India, lesbian desire is deemed as irrelevant, hence why the two works discussed later are so essential in promoting the presence and a voice for this relegated group.

Works around lesbian expression began to decline under colonialism; however, the 19th century saw the emergence of Urdu Rekhti poetry, which uses the feminine voice to speak to lesbian sexual experiences. The poetry is somewhat problematic as it is written by male poets, creating an underlying sense of misogyny. The poems are so sexually explicit that even though the works promote the experience of queer women, they inadvertently add a male gaze that fetishizes lesbian sexual behaviours. Jeffreys supports this, citing that lesbian erotic expression is always exaggerated as a “common motif of men’s sexual fantasies and [particularly features] in nineteenth-century modern pornography, as it does today” (109). Hence, *Fire* and *Kari* are significant post-colonial works as they are created by women who portray an accurate representation of lesbian sexual desires as stable, and produce a lesbian

discourse that is realistic and outside the masculine gaze. This celebrates, educates, and uplifts the beauty behind lesbian romances.

Lesbian Love and Patriarchy

The lesbian experience of love in India is portrayed in *Kari* and *Fire* as liberating but anxiety-inducing. As remarked prior, queer women have an invisible status within India, therefore these creators suggest that promoting this sexual visibility can lead to strife, social targeting, and a greater risk of violence/marginalisation.

In *Kari*, this is connoted through the relationship between Kari and Ruth, where Patil portrays their double attempted suicide. The opening page, (see Figure 1), showcases an image of the two lovers which is strikingly similar to Frida Kahlo's *The Two Frida's* (see Figure 2). Like *The Two Frida's*, Kari and Ruth are holding hands with their hearts visibly on display, yet Ruth is holding a surgical knife that

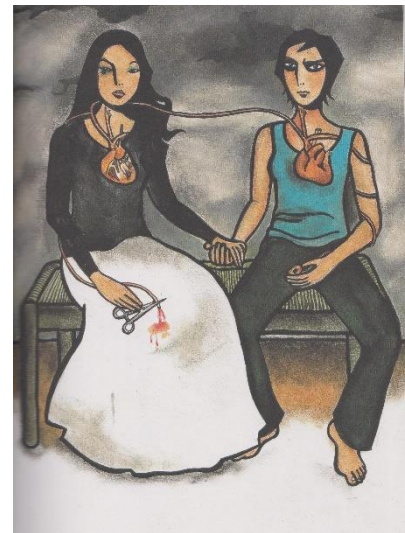


Figure 1

has cut off the main arterial blood flow between herself and Kari. Patil utilises Frida's work to emphasise how they rely on each other for sustenance and survival making their love strong; this is reinforced with the caption, "despite the slipshod surgical procedure, we are



Figure 2

still one" (3). Ruth severing the arterial blood supply also suggests that she holds the power and control over Kari's life and heart, denoting Kari's deep-seated, surrendering love for Ruth. Ultimately, Patil is being highly provocative in using such a violent and distressing image to open her graphic novel. She employs a globally recognised feminist

painting by Kahlo and contextualises it to an Indian queer context, and alludes to the internalised violence that occurs when queer women are denied the right to love. It is presented as physically and emotionally traumatic, thus a change in how lesbian love is perceived in India needs to occur.

The suicide attempt is discussed later, as Patil describes how, “Ruth met [Kari’s] eye” and “stepped off the ledge” (4). Kari, distraught by Ruth’s supposed suicide, proclaims, “I am the only one who loved her most in the world” (4) and decides to commit suicide herself. It is revealed both were unsuccessful in their attempts, with Kari being, “saved by a sewer, by the one our buildings avert their face from. I should have lingered within its loving coils and allowed it to drown me” (8). The two women feeling compelled to end their lives typifies the brutality and unacceptable nature of the Indian patriarchal climate. The sewer is a motif in the graphic novel which symbolises the marginalised and disregarded elements in neo-liberal Indian society. Kari is ultimately one with this sewer because she, like the sewer, is deemed as disposable and unacknowledgeable because of her status as a queer female. The sewer becomes a device that represents Kari’s navigation in a heteronormative society as a lesbian.

Kari’s impulsive response to end her life after Ruth’s suicide attempt amplifies the genuine and raw emotions that Kari has towards Ruth, highlighting how their relationship is intensely passionate. Patil, therefore, asks how society can demonise such a relationship where two people desire to be together so much that they are willing to die. Lesbian suicides are very common in India as Rao notes in *Criminal Love?*, “Lesbians, rather than gay men, are more likely to commit suicide [as] patriarchal society gives men the right to live as they want. However, the same freedom is not given to women” (100). Vanita further adds in her *Feminist Review* article, how “[Queer women are] pushed into family arranged marriages. On

the eve of such a marriage or following it, they often commit joint suicide” (50) because they believe they will be “reborn in the next life with the same spouse and/or the same friend” (51). This shows how heteropatriarchal structures cause such internalised trauma for queer women that suicidal tendencies are the only escape they have towards oppression, whereas MSM’s use their masculine power to enact how they please sexually.

Lesbian violence is also portrayed through *Fire* once the relationship between Sita and Radha has been discovered. When Radha tells Ashok, she is leaving him she shouts, “without desire I was dead, without desire there is no point in living. And you know what else! I desire to live, I desire Sita, I desire her warmth, compassion, and her body” (1:38:58), in which he responds in a sexually aggressive way. Radha’s repetition of the word “desire” is significant in exemplifying her growing realisation of how desire is a pre-requisite for herself and all women, thus linking to the film’s central theme of overcoming female sexual repression. Their altercation results in Radha’s sari catching on fire, in which her husband just stands by and watches. He also claims how Radha and Sita’s relationship “is a sin in the eyes of God and man” (1:38:33). It’s interesting how the feminine sexual relations in the film are deemed as sinful but the masculine forms of sexual abuse towards women, such as Ashok’s negligence of Radha and Mundu’s sexual abuse of Biji, which are dismissed as mistakes or typical behaviour. This suggests that the female queer expression is frowned upon because it does not benefit the patriarchal power structure, highlighting a double standard in sexual attitudes between men and women. Ashok’s violence demonstrates how the revelation of a lesbian relationship can invoke even greater levels of toxic masculinity within India.

Thus, Ashok feels his masculinity has been compromised so tries to assert his authority and protect his powerful position in the marriage through violence. He’d rather see

Radha immolate than allow her to continue her life free from his heteropatriarchal control. Indian culture places importance on marriage meaning lesbians are coerced into this patriarchal institution whilst still participating in lesbianism. This means queer women have to “find ways of balancing their identities whilst living up to society’s standards and their family’s wishes” (Kannan 3), adding an even greater pressure/anxiety onto their lives compared to queer men. Thereby, lesbian relationships are not accepted in India as they challenge the institution of marriage that keep men in a state of power.

The lesbian sexual acts in these works further destabilise the heteropatriarchal hierarchy. In *Kari*, the images of her erotic interactions with Ruth exhibit the complex nature of lesbian self-expression and passion. Patil depicts Kari’s sexual memories of Ruth in colour whilst the rest of the graphic novel is drawn in a bleak noir tone, (see Figure 3). This is shown on page 100, (see Figure 4), where three panels depict Kari and Ruth naked, embracing each other with vibrant colours of green in the background. The green represents the

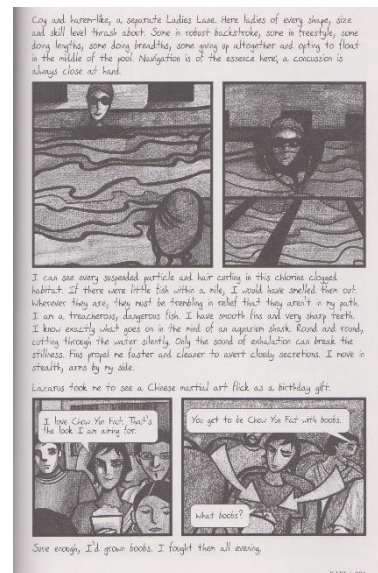


Figure 3



Figure 4

natural world epitomizing how Ruth’s presence provides a sense of normalcy to her life, underpinning that their love eases Kari and provides her with bitter-sweet nostalgia. Patil representing non-fetishized, realistic sex between women thus destabilises patriarchal sexual authority, allowing queer women to reclaim power. The concept of reclaiming sexual power is an interesting theme in *Kari* because there are many references to magic realism which leads us to doubt the existence of Ruth herself. Is

she real? Or a figment of Kari's imagination? Either way, Patil indicates how this is extraneous, as the representation of queer sex through Kari's eyes empowers her in a society that has stripped her agency. The narrative's confusing structure allows us to vicariously experience Kari's battle to understand her sexuality. Rajendran verifies this, arguing that the narrative structure, "invites the reader to identify with the narrator with the use of the pronoun 'I' which places the reader in a presumably positive affiliation with the narrator" (38). The graphic novel is thus a powerful new medium that can explore lesbian romance.

Similarly, *Fire* also depicts sexual love and romance in a scene where Radha and Sita have sex (1:31:32). The cinematography of the scene is important, as the shot bespeaks Radha dominating Sita which implies her acceptance and grasp over her sexual desires and needs. The sex scenes are revolutionary in depicting a form of feminine desire that is not usually expressed in mainstream Indian erotica or film. Lesbian sex can subvert patriarchal notions of sexuality and the idea that women need men to be sexually gratified. This is supported by Sweet who argues, "an orgasm" can be a "liberating experience of the nodule and pure consciousness of "clear light" (81). Thus, female sexuality is governed to prevent them from gaining consciousness and empowerment over their bodies through orgasms. This is troublesome as Mehta is indicating that the lesbian relationship between the two women forms out of repressed desire rather than lesbian urges, which is supported by John and Niranjana, who argues that "lesbianism was only peripheral to the theme of the film," and it "feeds the all-too-common stereotype that people become gay when deprived of normal sex" (582). Also, the film only assesses lesbian love between high caste women, perpetuating the pre-colonial notion that women with patronage can free themselves from masculine sexual desires.

Arguably, *Kari's* depiction of sexual and romantic love between queer women is more apt than *Fire*, as *Fire* uses the trope of lesbian sex to challenge patriarchal abuses rather than discuss how lesbianism itself is repressed by patriarchy. The ambiguous name of "Kari" can place this character amongst any Indian social setting and caste making her story more socially ubiquitous towards lesbian sexual expression than *Fire* does. *Fire* was at the forefront of queer liberation in India; it caused such a raucous over its lesbian themes that it was banned, leading to protests over queer women's visibility. The film is powerful in portraying the horrors that heterosexual and queer women face in neo-liberal India. Though problematic, it is still an important movie concerning the fight for female queer rights in India and was the first film to depict the multifaceted and emotional significance of lesbian relationships.

Both works show how lesbian love is rife with instability as Indian patriarchal society seeks to eviscerate any form of romantic and sexual practices between women. Lesbian love, though more stable and genuine than other heteronormative relationships, faces great risks from violence and fetishization by men. Lesbian love is denounced as it serves as a symbol capable of dismantling patriarchal control as lesbian relationships prove that men are not a necessary factor in women's lives. Before colonial intervention, lesbianism was accepted amongst high caste women until Section 377 marginalised lesbian activities and deemed them an invisible group. So, the two creators use romantic lesbian love to provide visibility to this marginalised group and raise awareness to how such stigmatisation needs to be eradicated for India to become more accepting.

Chapter Three

Hijras: Familial Violence and Third Gender

A discussion on Indian queerness would be incomplete without addressing the “Hijras” which is defined as “a person whose birth sex is male but who identifies as female or as non-binary” (Oxford Languages). Hijras play a unique and specific role in society due to their religious significance; they tend to show up and give blessings on auspicious occasions or forcibly turn to begging or prostitution. The identification around this gender non-conforming community in India is complex compared to the West. In Western culture, gendered labels are more rigid with only a few gender categories to choose from, whereas in India there are a plethora of “deviant” gendered identities, such as, “*kothi's, kinnar, jogappas, shiv shaktis (etc)*” (Semmlar 286). This chapter will seek to discover the root of India’s intolerance and transphobic attitudes, which originate from British Colonial inception into India. Thus, the creators of *TMOUH* and *Tamanna* showcase the hijra community as a unique and proud group. They desire social acceptance and love through family more so than a romantic relationship.

Hijras Pre-colonial Significance

Hijras’ were held in high esteem in pre-colonial India, and currently convey religious significance dating back to Ancient India as showcased through the Hindu religious tales of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The story of Iravan in the *Mahabharata* depicts gender fluidity, describing how “Krishna... turned into Mohini, married Iravan, and spent the night with him” (Agoramoorthy and Hsu 1452). This myth implies ancient India’s normalcy and embracement of the transgender/intersex community and also illustrates a sense of god-like

power that lies behind this community. By celebrating them as “holy”, it elevated their socio-cultural status. Hijras in pre-colonial Britain also held various amounts of political and social patronage under the Mughal Empire where leaders saw Hijras as, “political advisors, administrators, generals as well as guardians of the harems. They even occupied high positions in the Islamic religious institutions and were also able to influence state decisions” (Mishra 12).

Colonialism and the Impact on Hijra Social Status

Non-binary acceptance was seemingly unheard of in the West where Christian doctrines shunned these communities into hiding. So, the commonality of modern-day transphobia correlates to the emergence of the British empire and the systemic repression of Indian nationalism and customs. Subsequently, this shows that Hijras were intermingled within Indian nationalism and culture. Preston notes that once the British found that Hijras “had claims on the public revenues through grants of cash and lands” (372), they felt the communities' existence would impact imperial expansion; hence Britain began tyrannizing Hijras. The British implemented acts such as Section 377 to eradicate Hijras, as the article affected how they performed sex work and maintained a livelihood, whilst also restricting Hijras expressions of their sexuality.

However, the most potent and deleterious act the British inflicted on the community was the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. This act saw “237 castes and tribes [labelled] criminal-by-birth” (Hindustan Times). Through this, “Eunuchs were not allowed to wear female clothing and jewellery or perform in public and were threatened with fines or thrown into prison if they did not comply” (Biswas, BBC News) emphasising how Hijras experienced

forced assimilation into binary gender roles. After India's independence, the act was revised, meaning Hijras were no longer considered a deviant group and became legally recognised. Laws have been formed to protect Hijras, yet the colonial infestation on Indian culture led to this once revered group to fall in social standing. Outlining this context reiterates how post-colonial India has struggled dislodging its colonial transphobic roots, suggesting that British incursion made a damning impact on Indian culture and Hijra relationships.

Gendered Phobia, Familial Love and Education

This historical/cultural shift affected Hijras' accessibility to basic human rights, even with the legislation that recognises and supposedly supports them. One of these rights denied to them is the right to familial love and education. This section will argue how post-colonial India adopted the colonial nuclear family that is heteronormative and unaccepting of gender versatility. As Hijras pose a challenge to the patriarchal fabric of the familial institution, they are either ostracized by their family or, due to their "impotent" status, are deemed unfit in rearing a child. Thus, these post-colonial texts demonstrate the falsehood in this narrative by portraying Hijra individuals as capable of attaining parental responsibility and signifying parental agape for their adopted child. The two works therefore raise questions as to where Hijras can be placed in the Indian familial institution.

Hijra familial estrangement is reflected differently in *TMOUH* and *Tamanna*. Roy depicts the anxiety-inducing revelation of a parent discovering that their child is intersex, writing, "Is it possible to be terrified of your baby?... Her third reaction was to recoil from what she had created while her bowels convulsed, and a thin stream of shit ran down her leg" (8). Roy makes use of hyperbolic descriptions to denote the trauma Jahanara, the mother of

the Hijra Aftab/Anjum, faces. By having such a visceral physical response, it expresses the shame and self-loathing that revolves around giving birth to Hijra babies, whilst showcasing the lack of education around transgenderism/intersexuality. Many Indian parents believe a Hijras' disposition is their fault, highlighting how India has not addressed the biopsychological reality of this community. Furthermore, Roy deploys her narrative structure to showcase Jahanara's thought processes towards her child, stating "Her fourth reaction was to contemplate killing herself and her child" (8). Listing all these reactions displays Jahanara's impulsivity and incapability to cope with the reality of her child's genitalia.

Contemplating killing herself and her child, illustrates how the disgrace of rearing a Hijra child is placed on mothers, reinforcing how unaccepting patriarchal Indian society is towards Hijras and their families. This lack of education leads to a stigma that sets the path for the Hijra individuals to face an array of abuse throughout their life. Mondal et al supports this, claiming, "the stigma of being a Hijra is initiated within the family of origin forcing them to seek a life outside the biological family constellation" (172). This along, with Roy's work, reveals how the emergence of Indian transphobia is a cycle that begins with familial lack of understanding and acceptance of transgenderism and intersexuality.

Similarly, in *Tamanna* familial estrangement is portrayed when Tikku, a Hijra played by Paresh Rawal, asks his stepbrother for financial aid. In the scene, his nephew answers the door and receives him contemptuously, questioning, "Why are you knocking on my door" (50:49). Once Tikku's stepbrother appears, he degrades him, claiming, "Oh so you're the Hijra" (51:51) in which Tikku responds, "After all these years you are still horrible to me" (51:52) further expressing the familial violence whether physical or emotional that Hijras face. Amidst all of this disrespect, Tikku still showcases grace and reverence by following the

Indian customs as shown where he uses the little money he has to buy his stepbrother sweets, a tradition that marks good fortune and blessings (51:51). The use of dialogue coupled with Rawal's acting displays the dynamic between Tikku and his stepbrother. His stepbrother dehumanises and condescends Tikku, whereas Tikku acts courteously.

Accordingly, Bhatt uses the trope of Indian customs to subvert the ideologies around Hijras being vilified. This vilification of the Hijra community is a common trope in Bollywood, as Karla and Bhugra assert that Hijras in Bollywood are "used for comic relief" which "gives a reductionist view of Hijras and undermines any emotion in them" (164). Bhatt recognises the fundamentalist nature behind Bollywood and subverts its conformist themes to raise awareness of false stereotypes around Hijras and encourage tolerance. He presents Tikku as a profoundly aware character who is compassionate and more capable of understanding societal customs than his heterosexual cisgender family. Correspondingly, this scene questions why good-hearted individuals like Tikku are discriminated against, thereby calling for changes to occur within society around the treatment of Hijras. Thus, these artists are illustrating the fragility of the Indian familial structure and criticising how this warped belief of Hijra inferiority has caused a great injustice on a once revered and celebrated community.

The family institution in India produces an entrenched and continual trauma for Hijras, meaning they are forced to find alternative familial role models and retreat from their homes for support. Both works represent life under the new Hijra communities, displaying its accepting yet complex structure and culture. Anjum was still desired by her family as Roy notes, "[the media] were invariably disappointed when she told them how much her mother and father had loved her" (26). Regardless, Anjum's family's subtle binary gendered

propaganda caused her to leave to seek acceptance at a Hijra household titled the “Khawabgah”, meaning “House of Dreams.” The symbolism behind the name “Khawabgah” represents it as a collection of repressed desires and how this area may be capable of unifying and unlocking Hijras' longings. These safehouses described by Roy are a staple part of Hijra culture creating support, a safety net, and a globally distinct community. These houses are called ‘gharanas’ and within them, there is a hierarchical system where the head of the house is called a *nayak* and the other members are her *chelas*. These communities in turn become a make-shift family known as a ‘Hijra family’ that “comprises [of only] ‘daughters’, ‘sisters’ and ‘mothers’ – no males” (UKEssays). Hence, these communes are, for many Hijras, one of the first places that provides emotional support towards gendered anxieties and societal exclusion. These safehouses that only contain female familial lineages shifts the patriarchal dynamics of Indian society. This community actively rejects masculinity and showcases a strong sense of unification that allows them to survive without masculine interference. Thus this “Hijra family” creates a new wave of feminist sisterhood.

In *Tamanna*, Tikku separates himself from his gharana due to the prejudices that are involved in being a member of this commune, as Hijras in gharanas have to dress in saris and wear lots of makeup as Reddy states, “there [is] delight at passing as a woman, an ability that was highly valued in the community and explicitly articulates by Hijras as a positive attribute” (123). This representation and “construction of femininity” (142) is vital to gharana membership and disregarding this overt form of femininity may lead to Hijra family dismissal. To be absolved in Hijra familial culture, one must be unabashedly proud and overtly exaggerate their femininity. Tikku though rejects this performativity to avoid visibility leading to stigmatisation. This is shown through custom designs at 35:51 where Tikku asks Sajid for a suit due to the shame he faces around his Hijra body and to follow

gendered norms. However, Tikku, like many other Hijras', is uneducated due to transphobic ostracization faced at school causing stunted development of essential skills for employability. He can only provide for Tamanna by re-joining his gharanra and participating in the assigned role society has given him; as a spiritual bearer of good fortunes. This is typified when Tikku decides to dance at auspicious ceremonies, claiming, "I will prove how much energy and power is in the heels of this Hijra" (55:37). Later on, Tikku is dressed in a black sari and dancing which contrasts to him wearing his aforementioned suit. This contrast shows the versatility and burdensome nature of a Hijras' presentation of their identity. It is presented as daunting and showcases the difficulty that Hijras face in meeting gender expectations.

Tikku's decision to re-join his gharana is arguably a forced one. His status as a Hijra has left him uneducated, economically destitute, and homeless, meaning he has no choice but to accept his assigned role as an entertainer to survive. Thusly, Hijra families, though protective, are restrictive meaning many Hijras cannot break away and pursue their own life. Indian society thereby needs to be more economically accepting of Hijras, so they are not confined to just work around their Hijra family on auspicious occasions or begging and sex work. Their lack of income and support means they cannot provide for themselves as well as provide for their families.

Providing for family is another important theme addressed in these two works. As touched upon, a niche was created for Hijras within the patriarchal family structure where their presence connoted religious significance and blessings. Their role within the family has always been symbolic, which is ironic as Hijras themselves are denied the right to family. Due to their impotent status, they are seen unfit in raising children. Nevertheless, these two

texts challenge this notion and criticise this mentality that forbids Hijras to adopt, raise and love a child. In *TMOUH*, Roy details the growing maternal bond between Anjum and her adopted daughter Zainab who was abandoned. It cites, “She began to call Anjum ‘Mummy’” (31) and how “Mummy... was caught unaware by the fact that it is possible for one human being to love another so much and so completely” (32). Details of Anjum’s treatment of Zainab follows as, “She brought Zainab an unnecessary amount of toys... overfed her, took her for walks in the neighbourhood” (32). Roy’s use of listing here is effective in highlighting Anjum’s desire to please Zainab because she values her happiness and endeavours that Zainab is cared for and satisfied. Given that Roy has depicted a character who, throughout all her adversity, is capable of raising and loving Zainab and provides for her to an excess showcases a Hijras capability of motherhood, whilst also allowing trans women to feel a greater connection to their chosen gender identity.

Roy characterising Anjum like this creates a new queer discourse within India that subverts the notion that Hijras must live a life dedicated to servicing other families. *TMOUH* implies that gender plays no part in parental responsibility and love, its internal character. Zainab provides Anjum with a purpose, asserting how Anjum wanted to “transfuse herself into Zainab’s memory and consciousness, to reveal herself without artifice” (32). A child represents a vessel for Anjum to portray her authentic self without judgment. Ergo, child-rearing for the Hijra community is capable of aiding in societal acceptance and resistance to anti-trans/intersex ideologies. Kuiti supports this arguing, “the leitmotifs of queer womanhood and motherhood enact a ritualistic violation of the norms of domesticized heteronormative marriage and motherhood that are foundational elements of social and political life in modern India” (2). Roy’s narrative is capable of challenging fundamentalist values rooted in certain areas of politics and society.

Parenthood is also conveyed in *Tamanna* as Bhatt paints Tikku as a responsible and loving parent who, like Anjum, practices parental self-sacrifice for the betterment of their child. Tikku's lowly status means he struggles to provide for Tamanna financially, as showcased in the harrowing scene when Tikku visits his mother's grave and speaks to her stating, "I hope you won't be upset with me, but I sold all your clothes and possessions to pay for Tamanna's school" (33:33). Tikku's depiction of self-sacrifice here demonstrates the ferocity of a parent's responsibility/love for their child and how parenthood entails suffering for your child to succeed. This sacrifice when contrasted with the violent actions of Tamanna's biological father allows Bhatt to question the inept attitudes towards Hijras. Tamanna's father who follows gendered conventions commits atrocities in the name of social image, whereas Tikku's very image challenges social propriety but adopts the correct parental attitudes.

Bhatt indicates that Hijras are capable of parenthood more so than the patriarchal figures that deem the presence of a daughter as a burden. This is shown in Tikku's monologue to Tamanna after her suicide attempt. Tikku explains to his daughter, "Are you threatening me with your life? I've given my life to you and I have died many times to raise you.... I have a right to your life so I will never let you die" (01:27:52). The use of dialogue here is important as Tikku uses the term "right" to life. As mentioned prior, Hijras' rights are scarce so Tikku's recognition of his right to Tamanna suggests a sense of self-worth that he recognises within himself. Thus, through parenthood, Tikku has been able to find value in his life. Both artists reiterate how Hijras desire parenthood to gain some semblance of security and express a form of familial unconditional love that society has denied them.

Tamanna also highlights anxiety around familial support and death. At 28:41, the other Hijras in the community argue with Tikku because he dissociates himself from them. They claim how they are his only family, and they will cremate him when he dies in which he responds, “My Tamanna will put the white sheet over me” (28:40), correlating to the Indian death ritual that family members enact on a dead body. However, the Hijras respond pessimistically suggesting that Tamanna will not support Tikku in old age. This panics Tikku, purporting the fragility and inability to experience ease in a Hijras life, whilst reinstating this concept of unstable and short-lived relationships that Hijras experience in their lives.

As Khan et al implies, “many Hijras could not return to their families [in old age]. They stayed outside their home and had no choice but to struggle against illness, poverty, and loneliness” (447) and later details how “death also cannot either guarantee a space nor can it terminate the endless disgrace. With death, everything ends besides the pain of the life of a Hijra. Death initiates another critical chapter of abuse and dishonour for the dead bodies” (447). This displays that the life of Hijras are full of anxiety, that even in death they cannot face comfort that their bodies will be buried and treated in a dignified way; it also conveys how the symbol of a child can reduce that anxiety. A child like Zainab or Tamanna provides humanity and identity to the Hijra body. A child is a necessity for Hijras to feel security and purpose in a life that has denied them a right to familial love and assigned them a social purpose that disallows them to expand outside their Hijra social families. Wherefore, children provide Hijras with a sense of relief that in old age they will be taken care of and supported in a society that does not provide the correct care towards the third gender.

Overall, Hijras, a once revered and accepted subculture in India, became dishevelled due to the impact of colonialism and modernity. The highest societal injustice is that Hijras

are denied a right to familial love and education meaning they are unable to expand and progress past their societal role as religious performers. The two works infer the Hijra life as distressing and distrustful as heteropatriarchal society refuses to accept the visibility of Hijra identity. It evinces the power of the Hijra family in creating a make-shift society that protects Hijras from further stigmatisation. Moreover, children in the works attest to the important notion that Hijras are incapable of being good parents because society deems them as deviant. In portraying them as socially aware, compassionate, and loving parents, the artists illustrate how these individuals are more than capable of acting proficiently as a parent, therefore the transphobia and intersex hatred they face is unfounded, so ignorance and injustices towards the Hijra community needs to end.

Conclusion

On balance, queer Indian literature and film uses sexuality, romantic desire, and familial kinship to raise the visibility of marginalised groups. Chapter One was able to show how queer men's position as "men" provides them with greater mobility and ease with how they enact sexually and socially, meaning they can continue with their "deviant" sexual liaisons though in private social spaces. It also revealed how Indian cultural concepts of homosociality have provided a guise for gay behaviours to men, a privilege that has not been provided for queer/trans women. *Mohanaswamy* and *Hostel Room 131* display how space and Indian culture has enabled homoerotic behaviour to flourish and also argues how Indian discourse has been focused on the representation of sexual acts and violence against gay men. Therefore, it is important to map out how queer women/Hijra women were viewed in pre-colonial India and how their position in society decreased due to colonial infiltration. These women/non-binary individuals' expression of sexual desire, love and stability has been left fractured and fleeting as they face the greatest form of marginalisation and ostracization in the queer community. Thence, queer discourse needs to be recentred around the struggles of these sections of the community and provide them with methods of support that allow them to experience stable and long-lasting relationships – whether that's through their romances or through the family.

Lesbian relationships in pre-colonial India were tolerated until colonial implementation, where lesbian women were deemed as an invisible and demonised group, and in a global sense fetishized as their sexual antics bolstered male sexual entertainment. The writers/directors who discuss queer women and the expression of their love and relationships do so to dismantle this heteropatriarchal authority and raise awareness to a type

of sexual expression that celebrates this love. They present these lesbian relationships as more stable and less violent than heterosexual relationships, but concurrently indicate how revelations of lesbian relationships can cause violence and such extreme mental turmoil that women turn to suicide in their relationships. Thereupon, the creators ask that these types of relationships be accepted, and queer women's relationships be provided with greater social support on how they manoeuvre through a heteronormative society. *Fire* addresses how sexual desire is restricted for women and how the familial home and marriage are sites of violence for them, thus queer relationships provide respite from that systemic abuse. *Kari* more effectively handles the representation of queer women in India with Patil using the form of a graphic novel to empower Kari's love and sexual interactions with women. Subsequently, more lesbian art needs to be created in order for this type of discourse to be addressed in society.

Finally, Hijra relationships in the texts are presented mainly through the concept of familial love. Hijra status seems to suggest that these individuals have accepted the notion that they are unable to find love yet still desire familial warmth and children. Due to Hijras social position as religious performers and their impotent status, they are deemed as unfit in raising children or even being accepted in their biological family. Therefore, many Hijra individuals turn to each other and form make-shift familial communities that disturb patriarchal structures through their gender performativity. The two works, *TMOUH* and *Tamanna* project the growing variations and responses that the Hijra characters have towards the family, as they adopt and care for varying family members and children whilst also relying on their Hijra families. Hijras rely on the family structure to ease their psychological turmoil and struggles in being non-binary whilst also providing them with purpose. Being denied the most primary form of love exposes how this community has truly been entirely

neglected socially in India. Whilst religious ideologies elevate this community, it in turn restricts them to a social role which leads them to greater poverty, self-hatred, and marginalisation. Society therefore needs to be educated on Hijra customs and biopsychology to accept this group into the wider socio-economic sphere and improve their life chances and relationships.

India is becoming a right-wing, fascist superpower under Modi's Hindu-nationalist government, therefore discussing queer women/Hijras is important in providing a voice to a group whose position in society may soon come under threat under such a non-inclusive government. Addressing the strife of queer individuals in India is vital for colonial mentalities to be relinquished and revert to a society that is accepting of queer citizens, rather than India's current society which is targeting increasingly more minority groups like Sikh farmers and Kashmiri Muslims. India also has reinstated and revoked Section 377 countless times, therefore the stability of this group in India will always be tentative, so more discussions around this oppressed group and greater education will help solidify their deserved placement in society. Overall queer individuals should not be denied the right to love, whether in a familial or romantic/sexual sense as that takes away the very foundations of what it means to be human through social interactions and forming powerful relationships. Without these relationships queer individuals are left mentally ill and vulnerable. Thereby the representation of love and sexual expression is paramount in queer Indian discourse in providing humanity to an unfortunately dehumanised group.

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