



Queer Literary Expressions in the Select Anthological Collection “Yaraana” by Hoshang Merchant—A Critical Study

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Abstract— This Research paper deals with a critical study of selected Indian queer literary marvels written by different Queer Writers of India, which has found its deep expression in the anthological collection “Yaraana” (1999) by Hoshang Merchant. Being gay or queer in India has always been considered and believed to be of occidental origin and has no connections with Indian society despite the fact that Homosexuality in India dates back to as early as the 2nd Century CE and is mentioned in the ancient Indian text Kamasutra and is explicitly depicted in the famous Khajuraho Temple. Most early modern queer writings were not documented due to the fear of being executed, as it was illegal and despised at the time. Queer Indians have secretly produced a lot of good writing reflecting their common lives, perceptions, feelings, pains, and pleasures. These emotions find its expressions in both English and other Vernacular languages and the later is also translated into English by many modern and openly gay writers like Hosang Merchant, R. Raj Rao, Mahesh Dattani, Ashok Row Kavi, Vishnu Khandekar, Vikram Seth etc. Due to the queer nature of queer literature, most writings are difficult for common readers to find. Unlike the common literary genres, the LGBTQ genre came much later in the English Literary Canon. The anthological collection of gay writings from South Asia by Hoshang Merchant has made the critical study of Queer Expressions easy and possible. The anthology is a collection of 47 Queer Expressions by different Queer Writers of South Asian origin, mostly from India. Diaspora has also enriched the queer literature through their vivid expressions and shades. Love, deception, acceptance, romance, hidden lives, queer feelings and fear of being found out, sexual desire and pleasures, and unfulfilled ambitions have been beautifully woven through stories by queer writers. This provides insight into their lives and the societal conditioning impacting their lives.



Keywords— Queer, Queer Literature, Yaraana, Kamasutra, LGBTQ, Queer Expressions, Hosang Merchant, Gay, Homosexuality, English Literary Canon, Diaspora, Occidental, Anthological, South Asia

INTRODUCTION

Queer writing in India dates back over 2,000 years, with its first mention in the Kamasutra. In modern era the first gay novel The Boyfriend by R. Raj Rao was published in 2003. Since then, many gay writings have been widely published and have found expression in multifaceted forms.

Hoshang Merchant, an Indian queer writer became a well known figure in queer literary circle by his anthological collection of Gay writings in English from South Asia titled

‘Yaraana’ which was published in the year 1999 by Penguin Books India. This book contains a collection of 47 queer writings by different authors in various forms and colors, both in prose and poetry. Hoshang Merchant edited this anthology himself not because of any academic interest but instead it was his personal interest and sociological discourse.

The anthology opens with an introduction in which Merchant discusses homosexuality and his experience with

it. He introduces himself as "I, a male homosexual Parsi by religion, Christian by education, Hindu by culture and Sufi by persuasion" (Hoshang Merchant)

According to Merchant, the word 'gay' is more like a political term. He does not like the fact that in India, gays are often confused with 'eunuch.' All the beautiful women and their images in Bollywood are the product of gay men as they work as dress designers, hair stylists, choreographers, or make-up men. Even Pop culture is created by homosexuals.

Hoshang believes in Judith Butler Sexual Performativity which states that "The misapprehension about gender performativity is this: that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a 'one' who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today." (**Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"**). Therefore, gender, whether gay or straight, male or female, or cis or trans, is just a social construct.

According to Merchant, gay liberation in India can be seen as equivalent to women's liberation, as both fight against toxic masculinity; however, they cannot come closer as they fight for their rights in their own way, and different powers are at work. The intersections and interplay of gender, caste, and nationality play an important role in individual choice. Shyam Selvadurai a renowned gay writer from Sri Lanka has to choose between a tamil lover and his citizenship during the time of ethnic strife and civil war. He expresses the concern that there are rapes and oppression against gay men just like women, but it is not even talked about as it is not a gender conformity or heteronormative.

Most religions see procreation as the only aspect of human sexuality, and anything other than it is seen as a crime or unnatural. This has created hatred against homosexuals, as it does not lead to any biological production and is wrongly interpreted as if it is just 'recreation' and nothing is serious about it. This has forced many homosexuals into the closet in India, and they are subjected to forced marriages, which make them lead a double life. Youthful friendships without including homosexuality is common in Indian Men which is often termed as 'Yaraana' or 'dosti'. Most men masquerade under straight poses as it is more socially comfortable for them. Even queer authors choose not to reveal their sexuality and remain anonymous, as they consider this may harm their literary careers.

'Yaraana' (1999), as named by Merchant, is a blend of expressions of male friendship, love, and bonding that shaped the often ignored aspect of the South Asian queer narrative, from Ashok Row Kavi's autobiographical

masterpiece, 'The Contract of Silence,' to Vikram Seth's account of homosexual love between Phil and Scot in *The Golden Gate*. From Mahesh Dattani's homosexual drama to R. Raj Rao bold account of homosexual eroticism and from the intense poetry of Dinyar Godraj, Adil Jussawalla and Sultan Padamsee to translated works from Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati and other Indian Languages by Bhupen Khakkar, Kamleshwar, Vishnu Khandekar.

From Shyam Selvadurai's Srilankan war-torn saga of love in 'Funny boy' to K.C. Ajay's account of love and friendship in Nepal reveals 'Yaraana' or male bonding in a unique way.

FIRAQ GORAKHPURI'S PARTING PAIN

The anthology of Hoshang Merchant begins with the famous reflective essay of Firaq Gorakhpuri, *Public Meeting and Parting as Private Acts*. The essay beautifully tells the story of meeting someone in a public place, like the lovers caught each other's attention and fell in love; inside their hearts there's a feeling of happiness and intense love that can be felt only by them and not by the world. Therefore, it is a world of homosexuals who can feel this inside them. After every meeting, there is parting; sometimes it becomes a memorable memory, and sometimes it takes a new course. Whatever it becomes, meeting and parting in public become private acts that can only be felt by the person experiencing them. William Shakespeare has beautifully expressed this feeling "parting is such sweet sorrow that I shall say good night till it be morrow" (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* Act 2, Scene 2). In homosexual love, it is a forbidden feeling that remains concealed to protect oneself from the tortures of society and the fear of being judged.

Homosexuals can feel the loneliness of parting as their relationship seems impossible in a non-conforming society that mostly sanctions only binary relationships.

ASHOK'S CONTRACT OF SILENCE

In his autobiography, *Contract of Silence*, which is mentioned in Chapter 2 of *Yaraana* by Hoshang Merchant, Ashok Row Kavi explains how queer people maintain silence about their sexuality and remain invisible to people and society. They practice their sexuality in silence due to fear of being 'found out' and humiliated by society, which is largely heteronormative and homophobic in nature. He mentions that some feminists who were also fighting toxic masculinity were homophobic in their writings. Ashok was barely eighteen when he decided to publish an article on homosexuality, which was not so common at that time. Interestingly, Khuswant Singh, a famous Indian English writer, was heading the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, a premier periodical that published the article.

Ashok also mentions religious bigotry and how it promotes hatred of homosexuality and myths about homosexuals spreading diseases. Some religious groups were so realistic, broad-minded, and progressive that they embraced queer leanings. He mentioned his 'coming out' at the Ramakrishna Mission, where monks made him feel comfortable and accepted.

Ashok says that his position in the family was secure as he was considered a brahmachari (bachelor), which is tied to his silence about his sexuality. Even the condition of a woman in the family remains the same as his Akka (father's sister), who also faced isolation and rejection due to her sexuality.

Ashok explicitly details the gay subculture in Bombay in the seventies and early eighties and his homosexual experiences with famous professionals. Most homosexuals married and lived like heterosexuals to avoid societal interrogation and maintain heteronormativity. Ashok also mentioned the *Bombay Dost*. It was **India's first registered magazine for the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBTQ) community**. It became the saviour for most of the queer members who thought there was no one to turn to. Some local politicians in India had bizarre views about homosexuality, and they were both homophobic and misogynist.

Even in his family, Ashok felt the heat of homophobia; one of his siblings complained to his mother that his homosexuality was making their lives worse. Logically, it had nothing to do with his siblings' family lives, but it was hatred that for every bad thing happening to them, they just blamed homosexuality, as it was the easiest way to escape their own faults and deficiencies, as being heterosexist was perfectly flawless and completely acceptable.

Social acceptance and discrimination was not just the only problem faced by homosexuals but it was another enemy of mankind and the social stigma behind it which they had to face it was HIV AIDS. The Gay Asian and Lesbians Group's Association (GALGA) was set up in late 1992, and its members were those who were sexually abused and suppressed by the heterosexist majority. Ashok extensively toured to spread awareness about homosexuality and even presented his paper, 'Emerging gay peer groups in Bombay,' at the Eighth International Congress on HIV AIDS, which made him ill. In this condition of illness, he was supported by his friends, who were more than his family. As a gay man, his struggle and fight for himself and the cause of queer people is remarkable.

MAHESH DATTANI'S NIGHT QUEEN THAT BLOOMS AT NIGHT

Mahesh Dattani's play *Night Queen* revolves around Raghu and Ash, who share love and affection for each other. Ash,

due to his fear of society and people, decides to marry Gayatri, who happens to be Raghu's sister. Both of them meet in Raghu's room at night and pour their hearts out to each other. However, none of them are ready to accept who they are due to fear of society and non-conformity. *Night Queen*, grown outside Raghu's room, is the symbol of hidden love, which blooms only in the night, away from people in the dark, just like the love of Raghu and Ash, who show their affections towards each other only in the night. Raghu confronts Ash, who is pretending to love and marry Gayatri due to fear of being tortured by society and his brother, who considers homosexuals worse than lepers.

This play highlights how homophobia forces someone to live in the closet and hide their true feelings. To gain acceptance and approval from society, they are forced to marry someone for whom they have no feelings and live a life of lies and betrayal. This also questions the institution of marriage, where marriages are arranged just to keep the family tradition going on, without considering whether such marriages are successful or not. Raghu and Ash at last embrace each other. Raghu says "We should give each other the chance to bloom – at least at night" (*Night Queen*) reflects uncertainty of a queer relationship which never lasts long due to social non-conformity and acceptance.

R. RAJ RAO'S MOONLIGHT TANDOORI

Moonlight Tandoori is a poignant account of R. Raj Rao's his stay in England as an Indian Student and his feelings and emotions as a gay man living away from his homeland and feeling homesick.

Moonlight Tandoori is a restaurant where R. Raj Rao used to live in a room above this restaurant. During his stay, he develops an emotional attachment to a young boy named Khalid, who works in the restaurant. It was quite embarrassing for R. Raja Rao to show affection to the young boy because of his age. He felt lonely and homesick away from his home and family, and in this feeling of loneliness, he was seeking the company and friendship of someone whom he could count on. He developed an attachment to Khalid. When he revealed his feelings for Khalid, he was equally puzzled and stated, 'I have sex with women, not with men.' He stopped talking to the author as it was non-conforming. The author was longing for friendship and affection from someone in an alien land. Finally, forty-eight days before his departure to India, Khalid realized that the author was leaving the country and complained about racial prejudice in England, which was very common for any Asian folk. Both shared romantic affections with each other as they needed company in the strange land. The story presents a deep feeling of affection, loneliness, and love that has a happy ending but is never fulfilled and has no future burdened by heteronormativity and circumstances.

FUNNY BOY – A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AMIDST ETHNIC CONFLICT

The Srilankan writer Shyam Selvadurai in his coming-of-age story *Funny boy* pens his autobiographical story about his search for identity in the hard times of civil ethnic conflict between Tamil and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka.

In his childhood Arjie (Author) fall in love with a Sinhalese boy named Shehan and identity as being homosexual, but he felt a great pain in embracing it as he was faced with two bitter challenges the one is the self- acceptance and the second the biggest of all is the ethnic conflict which affected his own feeling for Shehan as he was Sinhalese and author was Tamil. This created a barrier for his love to flourish and thrive.

Judith Butler Gender performative is clearly seen in the life of Arjie as he is expected to perform the role of masculinity through playing cricket, showing interest in girls, avoiding feminine activities, behaving in an aggressive manner these repeated acts, behaviours and performances highlights that Gender is performative rather than a fixed act.

Michael Foucault's Discursive power of Sexuality is seen in *Funny Boy* as the institutions of power and authority like Arjie's Family, School and Society shaped his Sexuality as family compels him to regulate his behaviour, school teaches him to be masculine, the society expects him to conform to the heterosexual norms. His attraction to Shehan also challenges heteronormativity; he does not conform to the social norms of heterosexuality, as given in '*The Epistemology of the Closet*' by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Heartbroken, he has to leave Sri Lanka for Canada as his home and relationship are destroyed due to ethnic conflict. Therefore, there is an intersection between sexuality and ethnic discrimination.

"I felt hot, angry tears begin to well up in me as I saw this final violation. For the first time, I began to cry for our house. I sat on the verandah steps and wept for the loss of my home, for the loss of everything that I held to be precious. I tried to muffle the sound of my weeping, but my voice cried out loudly as if it were the only weapon I had against those who had destroyed my life". (*Funny Boy*)

YAYATI – A DESIRE THAT HAS NO ENDING

Yayati by Vishnu Khandekar originally written in Marathi translated by Nilesh Jahagirdar is story of a king who desire for bodily pleasure even after his marriage to Devyani. To fulfil his sexual desires, he becomes involved with Sharmistha. His pursuit of sexual pleasure challenges the conventional ideas of marriage, morality, and monogamy. This desire for pleasure is connected with the authority and power he holds as a king, as stated by Michel Foucault's discursive power of sexuality. His toxic masculinity fosters

his patriarchal ambition, and Devyani and Sharmistha are merely victims of his desire.

According to Judith Butler's Gender Performativity, his repeated interplay of gender and uncontrolled sexual desire has made him blind to youthful longevity, and to gain this, he even becomes ready to take away the youth of his son Puru. Puru, as an obedient child, sacrifices his youth for his father Yayati, but the desire has no end and limit; at last, he feels very regretful but cannot even face his son Puru due to his embarrassment.

"Earlier, I had not been able to bear the sight of my own reflection. Now, I cannot bear the sight of Puru. Before leaving the town, Sharmista sent me a message: 'Let Puru always be blessed by the King.' Instead, I struck him with a thunderbolt. I felt like going near him, embracing him, and consoling him, but only for a moment. I could not dare to do it. Sin is such a coward!" (*Yayati*)

THE SWEETEST OF ALL THE LOVE

The Sweetest of All, written by Frank Krishner, is a short autobiographical story included in *Yaraana*. It is the story of a young homosexual man, Mark, who discovers his feelings and attractions and the difficulty of living an honest life in a heterosexual world.

As a teenager he fell in love with Frank Richards a man who is older than him and developed an emotional and physical attachment with him but unfortunately due to socially imposed ideas of masculinity and heteronormativity Frank Richard could not accept homosexual identity and wishes Mark were a woman. To protect his relationship, Mark thought of undergoing a sex-change operation, but the doctor advised him that he was perfectly normal and should not change his sex just to please someone. His relationship with Richard could have existed if Richard accepted him the way he was; unfortunately, it ended. Years later Mark fell in love with another man named Rajen who supported him and accepts him the way he is but he also got married and Mark decided not to disrupt his marriage so kept himself away from him and only considers him as his friend and brotherly figure. It is interesting to note that Rajen although accepts Mark for his homosexual identity but he himself is not immune to the rigid family and societal expectations and decides not to marry Mark.

Finally, Mark was approached by another young man named Praful, who seems to be another possible romantic match. The story ends with the bitter sweet tone, although Mark experiences many relationships but the relationship with the Rajen was sweetest of all, remembering Rajen he says "It wasn't my first love. It was not my last, but yours was the sweetest of all."

Mark is a victim of social expectations and unfulfilled love like any other homosexual man seeking love in the heteronormative society. His feelings are subdued, and he hopes to find the love that can set him free. Most of the people he loved did not continue their relationships with him due to fear of being oppressed and humiliated, and they finally turned to a heterosexual conventional way of living. This follows the principle of compulsory heterosexuality as given by Adrienne Rich, where society pressures people to be straight or heterosexual and is treated as a default or normal choice.

CONCLUSION

The Study of select queer works in Hosang Merchant's 'Yaraana' provides vivid insight into the lives of queer individuals, which are largely shaped by the complex interplay of society, power, institutions, norms, performative acts, and expectations. The Queer theory of Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler and Adrienne Rich explains the elements that influence sexuality and the life of queer people. If these elements are broadly studied, the lives of homosexuals can be improved, and the goal of a more inclusive society can be achieved. The larger gap and discrimination can be narrowed by addressing their concerns and feelings. Heteronormativity and conventional ideas of sexuality need to change, and broader studies are needed to include queer individuals in mainstream society. Society evolves, as do the ideas that govern it. The toxic masculinity, compulsory heterosexuality and its effects can influence queer peoples' life and are forced to suppress their feelings which does more harm than good. The concerns of queer people must be heard and given due importance in a just and egalitarian society.

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