

## Queer Voices in Contemporary Indian English Literature: Identity, Resistance, and the Politics of Representation

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**Abstract:** The emergence of queer voices in contemporary Indian English literature represents one of the most significant and politically charged developments in the nation's literary landscape since liberalization. This paper examines the ways in which queer writers and texts in India negotiate the intersecting pressures of colonially inherited legal structures, postcolonial nationalism, caste and class hierarchies, and the imperatives of global LGBTQ+ visibility politics. Focusing on selected works by authors including Vikram Seth, R. Raj Rao, Mahesh Dattani, Ismat Chughtai (in translation and critical discourse), and emerging contemporary voices, the paper argues that queer Indian English literature does not constitute a monolithic tradition but a richly plural field of contestation — one in which desire, gender, caste, religion, and regional identity intersect in ways that resist assimilation into Western queer frameworks. Drawing on queer theory, postcolonial feminist criticism, and Dalit-queer scholarship, the study traces the evolution of queer representation from coded, euphemistic textual strategies under conditions of legal and social prohibition to the more explicit and politically assertive literature that followed the decriminalization of homosexuality in India in 2018. The paper also interrogates the politics of language, arguing that the choice to write in English implicates queer Indian authors in complex negotiations between global legibility and local specificity. Ultimately, it contends that queer Indian English literature constitutes a crucial archive of dissent — a body of work that challenges not only heteronormative social structures but also the exclusions produced by nationalism, casteism, and postcolonial modernity.

**Keywords:** *Queer Literature, Indian English Fiction, LGBTQ+ Representation, Postcolonialism, Section 377, Dalit-Queer, Gender Identity, Heteronormativity, Intersectionality, Indian Sexuality Studies.*

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### Introduction

The story of queer identity in India is inseparable from the story of colonialism. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, introduced by the British colonial administration in 1861 under Thomas Macaulay, criminalized 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature' — a provision that would govern the legal status of homosexuality in India for more than 150 years, until it was finally read down by the Supreme Court of India in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* in 2018. The irony of this history has not been lost on scholars: a law imposed by colonial power in the name of Victorian morality became, in the postcolonial period, a weapon wielded by nationalist forces who insisted that homosexuality was a Western import, a corruption of authentic Indian values. This double bind — the colonial imposition of homophobia and its postcolonial naturalization as indigenous tradition — provides the historical and political context within which queer Indian English literature must be understood.

Contemporary Indian English literature has, particularly since the 1990s, become an increasingly significant site for the articulation of queer experiences, identities, and politics. The liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 opened new cultural and communicative spaces; the proliferation of the internet and global media created new communities of identification and solidarity; and a growing body of writers began, with varying

degrees of explicitness and political self-consciousness, to bring queer lives into literary representation. This paper charts the terrain of this literature — its formal strategies, its thematic preoccupations, its internal debates, and its significance as a mode of cultural and political resistance.

The paper proceeds through five analytical movements: a historical overview of the conditions of queer literary production in India; an examination of the formal and rhetorical strategies through which queer experience has been represented; an analysis of the intersections of queerness with caste, class, and religion; a consideration of the politics of English as the language of queer visibility; and a reflection on the transformations wrought by the 2018 decriminalization judgment. Throughout, the paper attends to the heterogeneity and internal contestation of the field, resisting the temptation to construct a false unity from what is in fact a richly plural tradition.

### A History of Coded Desires: Queer Literature Before Decriminalization

The literary history of queer desire in India is far older than the category of 'queer literature' itself. Classical Sanskrit literature, Urdu ghazal poetry, and medieval bhakti verse all contain rich traditions of same-sex desire, homoerotic imagery, and gender non-conformity that predate both the colonial imposition of Section 377

and the emergence of Western sexual identity categories. Scholars such as Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, in their landmark anthology *Same-Sex Love in India* (2000), documented a pre-colonial literary tradition in which same-sex desire was represented with considerable nuance and without consistent moral condemnation. This scholarly recovery work is itself a form of queer cultural politics — a demonstration that homosexuality is not, as nationalist rhetoric insisted, a Western import.

Within the tradition of Indian English writing, queer desire was present long before it could be named explicitly. Ismat Chughtai's Urdu short story 'Lihaaf' ('The Quilt'), published in 1942 and widely discussed in Indian English critical discourse, depicted the intimacy between two women with an explicitness that resulted in an obscenity trial — and with a literary subtlety that has ensured its canonical status ever since. Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993), though primarily a novel of heterosexual social realism, included a quietly rendered subplot involving a gay character whose desires could not be spoken within the social world the novel depicts. These early texts developed what might be termed a 'hermeneutics of the closet' — a set of textual strategies for representing queer desire in ways that were legible to queer readers while maintaining deniability for others.

R. Raj Rao, widely regarded as one of the first Indian English writers to make queer sexuality an explicit and unapologetic subject of literary representation, published *The Boyfriend* in 2003 — a novel that was groundbreaking in its frank depiction of gay male desire in contemporary Mumbai. Rao's work is notable for its attention to the class dimensions of queer experience, representing a world in which sexual desire crosses the class boundaries that otherwise rigidly structure Indian social life. The novel's explicit sexuality was both its most provocative feature and the sign of its political seriousness: in a culture of enforced silence around queer desire, the act of naming was itself an act of resistance.

### **Drama, Diaspora, and the Queer Public: Mahesh Dattani and the Theatre of Sexuality**

If fiction has been one site of queer literary production in India, drama has been another — and arguably a more publicly charged one, given theater's capacity to convene audiences and provoke immediate communal response. Mahesh Dattani, the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning playwright, has made questions of sexuality, gender, and identity central to a body of dramatic work that has transformed Indian English theater since the 1990s. His plays — including *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999) — are notable for their simultaneous engagement with queer sexuality, gender violence, caste, and the specific cultural formations of middle-class urban India.

*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is particularly significant as one of the first mainstream Indian English plays to represent gay male characters with psychological depth and political seriousness. The play explores the intersections of sexuality, family obligation, and social respectability in contemporary Bombay, dramatizing the impossible negotiations that gay men must conduct between their desires and the demands of a heteronormative social world. Dattani's dramaturgy is notable for its resistance to both victimhood narratives and triumphalist coming-out stories, insisting instead on the ambivalence, contradiction, and

compromised agency that characterize queer experience in a context of ongoing social prohibition.

*Seven Steps Around the Fire* engages with the experience of hijras — India's traditional 'third gender' community — in ways that anticipate contemporary scholarly attention to the limits of Western binary gender frameworks for understanding Indian gender diversity. By centering hijra experience within a narrative of caste violence and police complicity, Dattani connects queer gender non-conformity to broader structures of social marginalization, resisting the tendency to treat sexuality as an autonomous domain separable from other axes of power. This intersectional sensitivity marks Dattani's work as a significant contribution not only to queer Indian literature but to the broader project of understanding how multiple forms of oppression operate together in the Indian social formation.

### **Caste, Class, and the Limits of Queer Solidarity: The Dalit-Queer Intervention**

One of the most important and challenging interventions in contemporary queer Indian literary and critical discourse has come from Dalit-queer scholars and writers, who have argued that mainstream Indian LGBTQ+ activism and literature — dominated largely by upper-caste, English-speaking, urban voices — reproduces the very hierarchies of caste and class that it claims to challenge. This critique, associated with scholars such as Dhruvo Jyoti and writers affiliated with the Dalit-queer movement, insists that caste is not separate from or secondary to sexuality as a structure of oppression in India, but that the two are fundamentally intertwined.

The Dalit-queer critique has significant implications for the literary field. It challenges the assumption that queer solidarity is sufficient to overcome caste difference, pointing out that upper-caste queer writing frequently centers experiences and subjectivities — urban, educated, English-speaking, middle-class — that are constituted by the exclusion of Dalit lives. The rise of Dalit autobiography and testimony in Indian languages, and its gradual translation and integration into English-language critical discourse, has expanded the representational range of queer Indian literature to include experiences of compounded marginalization that earlier writing largely ignored.

This intersectional analysis demands a reconceptualization of what 'queer Indian English literature' means as a field. If the category is defined by its language — English — then it risks reproducing the class and caste exclusions that English education in India has historically entailed. If it is defined by its subject matter — queer experience — then it must attend to the full range of that experience, including those whose queerness is compounded by poverty, caste discrimination, and linguistic marginalization. The most politically serious contemporary queer Indian English writing grapples with these tensions explicitly, seeking forms of representation adequate to the complexity of intersectional experience.

### **English, Visibility, and the Politics of Queer Legibility**

The choice to write in English is never politically neutral in the Indian context, and it carries particular significance for queer writers. English in India has historically been the language of the educated elite — the medium through which colonial rule administered itself and through which the postcolonial professional class reproduced its advantages. For queer writers, English offers

access to global networks of LGBTQ+ solidarity, international publishing markets, and the protective anonymity of addressing a cosmopolitan readership rather than a potentially hostile local one. At the same time, it positions their work within a global queer discourse that is largely shaped by North American and European frameworks — frameworks that may not be adequate to the specific historical, cultural, and institutional conditions of queer life in India.

The global circulation of Indian queer English writing has produced what might be called a 'politics of queer legibility': the pressure on queer Indian writers to produce texts that are intelligible to — and saleable within — global literary markets that have their own expectations of what queer experience looks like, what its narrative arc should be, and what political conclusions it should reach. The coming-out narrative, so central to Western queer literary convention, does not map straightforwardly onto Indian social realities where the institution of the joint family, the imperatives of marriage, and the absence of independent economic resources create very different pressures and possibilities for queer self-disclosure.

Several contemporary writers have negotiated this tension with considerable sophistication. Puja Changoiwala's nonfiction work on gender and sexuality, Temsula Ao's explorations of queer and tribal identity in northeast India, and the poetry emerging from queer literary collectives in cities like Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore all reflect a growing awareness that queer Indian literature must develop its own forms and conventions rather than simply importing Western models. This formal innovation is itself a political act — an assertion that queer Indian experience is not adequately captured by existing literary frameworks and that new forms are needed to do justice to its specificity.

#### After Section 377: New Freedoms, New Contestations

The Supreme Court's 2018 judgment in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India*, which decriminalized consensual same-sex relations between adults, was a watershed moment in Indian queer history — and it has had tangible effects on the literary landscape. In the years since the judgment, there has been a notable increase in the visibility and explicitness of queer Indian English writing: more novels and story collections with queer protagonists have found mainstream publishers; queer literary festivals and reading communities have expanded; and a new generation of writers has begun producing work that assumes, rather than argues for, the legitimacy of queer experience.

Yet the judgment has also revealed the limits of legal reform as a vehicle for social transformation. Decriminalization has not eliminated homophobia, transphobia, or the violence visited on gender non-conforming people — particularly those who are also poor, Dalit, or belong to religious minorities. The literary responses to this post-judgment moment are therefore marked by a complex ambivalence: celebratory of the legal recognition achieved, but clear-eyed about the distance between legal rights and social acceptance, and alert to the ways in which newly visible queer subjects can be assimilated into nationalist narratives of Indian modernity without any fundamental challenge to the structures of power that continue to produce queer suffering.

The most urgent contemporary queer Indian English writing maintains this critical vigilance — celebrating the possibilities opened by decriminalization while insisting that legal inclusion is not the same as justice, and that a literature adequate to

the complexity of queer Indian life must continue to speak to those whose experience falls outside the charmed circle of urban, educated, middle-class queer visibility. In this insistence, it continues the tradition established by the best of its predecessors: a tradition of honest witnessing, formal innovation, and political seriousness that constitutes one of the most significant contributions of contemporary Indian English literature to the global literary conversation.

## Conclusion

Queer voices in contemporary Indian English literature constitute a field that is as diverse, contested, and politically significant as any in the broader Indian literary landscape. From the coded desires of mid-twentieth-century writing to the explicit political assertiveness of post-decriminalization fiction and poetry, queer Indian English writers have consistently pushed at the boundaries of what can be said, who can say it, and in what form. They have done so against a backdrop of legal prohibition, social hostility, and cultural nationalism — and, increasingly, against the subtler pressures of global literary markets that seek to absorb queer experience into familiar narrative templates.

The field's most significant achievements lie not in any single text or author but in its cumulative production of an archive of queer Indian life — an archive that documents not only desire and its frustrations but the intricate ways in which sexuality intersects with caste, class, religion, region, and language to produce experiences that are irreducibly particular and irreducibly political. To read this archive seriously is to understand that the question of who gets to tell their story, in what language, and with what freedom, is never merely a literary question. It is a question about power, justice, and the kind of society India wishes to become.

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