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Queer Voices and Gender Fluidity in Indian Writing in English

Dr. Bisheshwar Ray*

Ph. D In English (JPU, Chapra) Managing Director, Rebel: A School of Personality Development, Chapra

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Abstract: This paper investigates the articulation of queer voices and the representation of gender fluidity in Indian Writing in English (IWE) from the late twentieth century to the present. Situating itself at the intersection of queer theory, postcolonial studies, and feminist criticism, the paper examines how writers such as Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Arundhati Roy, R. Raj Rao, Mahesh Dattani, and Anjali Joseph have engaged with non-normative sexualities and gender identities within the specific cultural, legal, and historical contexts of the Indian subcontinent. The paper argues that queer Indian writing in English cannot be adequately understood through Western queer frameworks alone; it must be read in relation to indigenous traditions of gender multiplicity — including the figure of the hijra, the concept of tritiya-prakriti (the third nature), and pre-colonial erotic cultures — as well as through the legacy of colonial law and the postcolonial state's ambivalent relationship to LGBTQ+ rights. The paper traces the movement from coded representation to explicit self-articulation in IWE, analysing the aesthetic strategies through which queer subjectivity has been constructed, contested, and celebrated.

Keywords: *Queer theory, Indian Writing in English, gender fluidity, postcolonialism, hijra, LGBTQ+, Section 377, non-normative sexuality.*

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Introduction

The emergence of queer voices in Indian Writing in English represents one of the most significant and transformative developments in the literary history of the subcontinent. For much of the twentieth century, same-sex desire and non-normative gender identities were either invisible in Indian literature or encoded in metaphor, allusion, and carefully sustained ambiguity — a consequence of both colonial-era legal prohibition and postcolonial social conservatism. The criminalization of 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature' under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a statute introduced by the British in 1861, cast a long shadow over the cultural expression of queer identity in India for over a century and a half.

Yet India's relationship to gender and sexuality has never been straightforwardly heteronormative. The classical Sanskrit tradition encompassed a remarkable range of erotic and gender possibilities: the Kamasutra's frank discussions of same-sex desire, the devotional literature of the bhakti movement with its gender-transgressive expressions of longing for the divine, the mythology of Ardhanarishvara — the composite male-female form of Shiva — and the ancient institution of the hijra, a third-gender community whose cultural authority predates colonialism by centuries. Any adequate account of queer Indian literature must hold these indigenous traditions alongside the colonial and postcolonial legal and social frameworks that have sought to suppress them.

This paper traces the arc of queer representation in Indian Writing in English across three broad phases: an early phase of coded and oblique representation; a middle phase of increasingly explicit literary engagement coinciding with the rise of LGBTQ+ activism in the 1990s; and a contemporary phase marked by confident self-articulation, generic diversity, and sustained aesthetic experimentation. Through close readings of key texts, this paper argues that queer Indian writing in English constitutes not merely a literature of identity politics but a sophisticated literary intervention in the politics of language, nationhood, the body, and belonging.

Theoretical Framework: Queering the Postcolonial

The theoretical architecture of this paper draws on two major bodies of thought that are in productive tension with each other: Western queer theory and postcolonial criticism. Queer theory, as developed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Michel Foucault, offers essential tools for reading the construction and disruption of normative gender and sexual identities. Butler's concept of gender performativity — the idea that gender is not a stable essence but a repeated, citational performance that produces the illusion of a natural interior self — is particularly useful for reading the gender-transgressive figures and voices that populate queer Indian fiction. Foucault's account of the historical production of sexuality as a category of knowledge and power provides the framework for understanding how colonial law and postcolonial governance have produced the homosexual as a subject — and, in doing so, produced resistance.

Postcolonial theorists, however, have complicated the application of Western queer frameworks to non-Western contexts. Gayatri Gopinath, in Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures (2005), argues that queer South Asian subjects occupy a doubly marginalised position — subordinated within both the heteronormative national imaginary and the racially

exclusive formations of Western queer culture. Similarly, Giti Thadani and Ruth Vanita have excavated the pre-colonial histories of same-sex love in Indian classical literature to challenge the colonial claim that homosexuality was a Western import. This paper takes seriously the argument that queer Indian identities are produced at the intersection of indigenous tradition, colonial history, and postcolonial modernity — and that literary representations of these identities are correspondingly complex.

A third theoretical resource is the growing body of scholarship on the hijra — India's ancient third-gender community — as a site of cultural negotiation between indigenous gender multiplicity and modern LGBTQ+ identity politics. Scholars such as Serena Nanda and Gayatri Reddy have documented the hijra's ambiguous social position: simultaneously revered and marginalised, possessing a sacred authority derived from emasculation and devotion to the goddess Bahuchara Mata, yet subjected to extreme poverty and social exclusion. The hijra's presence in Indian fiction — and the question of how contemporary queer writing relates to this pre-modern tradition of gender non-conformity — is a recurring concern of this paper.

Early Encodings: Oblique Desire in Twentieth-Century Indian Fiction

Before the emergence of explicitly queer Indian fiction in English, same-sex desire was present in the literary record in encoded, displaced, and allegorised forms. The constraints imposed by Section 377 and the social stigma attached to homosexuality in postcolonial India meant that writers who wished to explore non-normative desire were compelled to develop oblique literary strategies. This enforced obliquity, however, often produced texts of considerable aesthetic sophistication, in which the unspeakable found expression through metaphor, friendship, and narrative irresolution.

Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy (1993), while primarily concerned with the heterosexual marriage plot of its protagonist Lata, contains in the character of the poet Amit Chatterji and, more centrally, in the subplot involving Maan Kapoor's relationship with the courtesan Saeeda Bai, a sustained engagement with desire as excess — as something that cannot be contained by the socially sanctioned forms available to it. More explicitly, Seth's own homosexuality has informed his poetry, particularly the sonnets of The Golden Gate (1986), written in the Pushkin stanza, which explore gay love in California with a delicate irony that simultaneously performs and undermines the conventions of the romantic lyric.

Vikram Chandra's Love and Longing in Bombay (1997) and Sacred Games (2006) include significant queer subplots that are embedded within the generic conventions of the crime thriller and the urban panorama. In Sacred Games, the gangster Ganesh Gaitonde's complex relationships with other men — including a rival gangster and a guru figure — are rendered with a psychological complexity that exceeds the homosocial conventions of the crime genre and edges toward queer desire. Chandra's treatment is significant for the way it locates homosexual feeling within specifically Indian masculine cultures — the world of organised crime, of the Mumbai underworld — rather than within the imported vocabulary of gay identity.

Queering the Nation: Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things

Arundhati Roy's debut novel The God of Small Things (1997) — winner of the Booker Prize — occupies a pivotal position in the history of queer Indian fiction, though it is rarely classified as such. The novel's central transgression is the love affair between the upper-caste Ammu and the Untouchable Velutha — a crossing of caste boundaries that the novel presents as the fundamental social crime, the violation of the 'Love Laws' that prescribe 'who should be loved, and how. And how much.' Yet embedded within this narrative of inter-caste desire is a queer subtext of considerable significance.

The novel's treatment of Rahel's childhood friendship with Velutha has a tender, transgressive quality that exceeds normative categories. More explicitly, the brief, lyrical scene late in the novel in which the twins Rahel and Estha, reunited after years of separation, make love is one of the most daring acts of literary transgression in contemporary Indian fiction. Roy presents this incestuous encounter not as perversion but as a desperate reaching for connection in the ruins of a destroyed family — a radical refusal of the socially sanctioned forms of intimacy. The scene's queerness lies not in its homosexuality per se but in its wholesale rejection of the regulatory logic of permissible love.

Roy's second novel, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017), is perhaps the most ambitious engagement with queer and gender-fluid identity in Indian literary fiction to date. At its centre is Anjum, a hijra who lives in a graveyard in Delhi, whose story is told with a depth of psychological and cultural specificity that has few precedents. Anjum — born Aftab, a Muslim boy who knows from childhood that she is a woman — is not a symbol or a metaphor but a fully realised human subject, whose life encompasses love, loss, violence, political commitment, and an idiosyncratic form of spiritual grace. Roy's decision to make a hijra her central consciousness marks a decisive moment in the history of queer Indian fiction: the movement from representation of the marginalised other to full subjective inhabitation.

Roy's portrayal of Anjum is grounded in careful historical and sociological research but transcends documentation. The novel's formal structure — fragmentary, polyphonic, non-linear — mirrors the multiple and shifting identities it inhabits. Roy refuses both the sentimentalisation of the hijra as a figure of pathos and the exoticisation that has marked much mainstream representation of third-gender communities. Anjum claims her own story, her own desire, her own politics; she is a queer subject in the fullest sense — one who refuses the normal.

The Politics of Explicit Desire: R. Raj Rao and the Queer Urban Novel

If Roy's engagement with queerness operates through formal innovation and structural indirection, R. Raj Rao represents the other pole of queer Indian fiction: frank, confrontational, explicitly sexual, and politically unapologetic. Rao's novel The Boyfriend (2003) is a landmark in Indian literary history as one of the first works of fiction in English to represent gay male desire — including sexual experience — without euphemism or apology. The novel follows the relationship between Yudi, an older gay journalist, and Milind, a working-class young man from the Mumbai slums, across the fraught social terrain of class, caste, and the city.

Rao's fiction is deliberately provocative. He refuses the aestheticisation of queer desire into acceptable literary form; his prose is blunt, comic, and deliberately transgressive. This is itself a political strategy: in a literary culture where queer experience has been rendered respectable through euphemism or invisible through silence, Rao insists on the body, on desire, on the unglamorous

specifics of gay life in an urban India that has no vocabulary for it. The Boyfriend's Yudi is not a tragic figure, not a secret sufferer; he is a gay man who wants a boyfriend, and the novel's comedy arises from the social absurdity of this simple desire in a world that cannot accommodate it.

Rao's work also registers the class dynamics of queer life in India with unusual sharpness. Milind's queerness is entangled with economic survival; his relationship with Yudi is inflected by the economic disparity between them in ways that complicate any simple romantic narrative. Rao refuses to sanitise this complexity, insisting that queer identity in India cannot be understood independently of caste, class, and the uneven geographies of urban modernity. This intersectional awareness distinguishes his fiction from the more class-insulated queer narratives that dominate Western gay fiction.

Staging the Closet: Mahesh Dattani's Theatre of Queer India

The contribution of Mahesh Dattani to queer Indian writing in English extends the field beyond prose fiction into the domain of drama, and in doing so brings queer experience into a public space — the theatre — that has its own politics of visibility and exposure. Dattani, the first Indian playwright to win the Sahitya Akademi Award (1998), has made the representation of sexual minorities a central concern of his theatrical project. His plays Bravely Fought the Queen (1991), On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1998), and Seven Steps around the Fire (1998) engage, respectively, with domestic violence and lesbian desire, gay male identity, and the hijra community.

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai is Dattani's most direct engagement with gay male subjectivity. The play follows a group of middle-class gay men and women in Bombay as they negotiate their sexual identities in relation to family, friendship, and the threat of social exposure. Dattani's theatrical method is particularly suited to the exploration of the closet as a spatial and psychological structure: the play's use of split staging, overlapping dialogues, and temporal fragmentation formally enacts the divided consciousness of characters who inhabit two incompatible worlds simultaneously. The stage becomes a map of the queer psyche, in which the private and the public, the desired and the permissible, are held in constant, uncomfortable tension.

Seven Steps around the Fire extends Dattani's queer project to the hijra community, framing its investigation as a detective story in which a young academic investigating a hijra murder finds her assumptions about gender and social justice progressively destabilised. Dattani's strategy of using genre — the detective plot — to draw a mainstream audience into engagement with the lives of hijras is representative of a broader tendency in Indian queer writing to use familiar generic structures as vehicles for unfamiliar subjectivities. The play insists on the hijra's full humanity and exposes the violence of a society that simultaneously reveres and excludes them.

Gender Fluidity, the Hijra, and Indigenous Traditions of the Third Gender

One of the most distinctive features of queer Indian writing in English is its engagement with indigenous traditions of gender multiplicity that predate Western queer theory and resist easy assimilation to its frameworks. The hijra — a community of biologically male persons who identify as neither man nor woman, many of whom undergo ritual castration and devote themselves to the goddess Bahuchara Mata — represents a form of gender non-conformity with roots in classical Hindu and Islamic tradition. The hijra's cultural authority is ambivalent: they are invited to bless newborn children and new marriages, believed to possess auspicious and inauspicious powers, yet they are also subject to extreme social marginalisation, poverty, and violence.

Contemporary Indian queer writing in English has engaged with the hijra figure in complex ways. Roy's Anjum in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, as discussed above, offers the most sustained and fully realised literary portrayal of hijra subjectivity in IWE. But the figure also appears in Dattani's drama, in the fiction of Manju Kapur and Kiran Desai, and in a growing body of autobiographical writing, most notably A. Revathi's The Truth About Me (2010), originally written in Tamil and translated into English, which offers a first-person account of a hijra's life with remarkable candour and dignity.

The conceptual category of tritiya-prakriti — 'the third nature' — drawn from the Kamasutra and other classical texts, has been recovered by scholars such as Giti Thadani and Shivananda Khan as evidence of an indigenous Indian tradition of recognising and naming gender and sexual diversity beyond the male-female binary. This tradition does not map neatly onto Western categories of gay, lesbian, or transgender identity; it operates according to a different cultural logic, one in which the third gender possesses a sacred as well as social status. The recovery of this tradition serves an important function in queer Indian discourse: it counters the colonial argument that homosexuality and gender non-conformity are Western imports, alien to authentic Indian culture, and reasserts the indigenous roots of sexual diversity.

Several contemporary Indian English writers have drawn on this tradition to construct a specifically Indian queer aesthetic. Rather than simply adopting the narrative and political conventions of Western gay and lesbian fiction, they weave together indigenous mythological resources with contemporary experience to produce a hybrid literary form that is neither simply 'Indian' nor simply 'queer' in the Western sense. This formal hybridity mirrors the hybrid subject positions of their characters, who inhabit multiple cultural worlds simultaneously.

Section 377 and the Literary Imagination: Law, Criminality, and Liberation

No account of queer Indian writing in English can ignore the centrality of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code to the cultural landscape within which this writing has been produced. Introduced by the British in 1861 and retained by the postcolonial Indian state, Section 377 criminalised 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature,' effectively making same-sex acts between consenting adults illegal. The law shaped the possibilities and constraints of queer cultural expression for over a century, and its legal journey — struck down by the Delhi High Court in 2009, reinstated by the Supreme Court in 2013, and finally decriminalised by the Supreme Court in a landmark judgment in 2018 — has been intertwined with the development of queer Indian literature.

The 2018 judgment — in which Chief Justice Dipak Misra declared that 'sexual orientation is an essential component of identity' — was both a legal and a cultural watershed. It was preceded and accompanied by a significant growth in queer literary production, as writers and publishers became increasingly willing to engage with queer themes. The decade between the Delhi High Court's 2009 judgment and the Supreme Court's 2018 decision was particularly generative, witnessing the emergence of a substantial

body of queer fiction, memoir, poetry, and drama in Indian English.

The shadow of Section 377 falls across even texts that do not directly reference it. The fear of exposure, the necessity of secrecy, the doubling of identity required to survive in a society that criminalises desire — these are structural features of queer Indian experience that are encoded in the formal strategies of queer Indian fiction. The closet, in Butler's formulation, is not simply a private space of concealment but a social structure, produced and maintained by the threat of legal and cultural punishment. To write about the closet in India, before 2018, was to write under and against the law.

Contemporary Voices: The Post-377 Literary Landscape

The decriminalisation of homosexuality in India in 2018 has opened new possibilities for queer literary expression, though it would be naive to suggest that legal change has dissolved the social, familial, and religious pressures that continue to shape queer lives. The contemporary landscape of queer Indian writing in English is characterised by generic diversity, intersectional awareness, and a growing confidence in claiming queer experience as central to, rather than marginal within, the story of modern India.

Autobiography and memoir have emerged as particularly important genres in the post-377 moment. Works such as Devdutt Pattanaik's retellings of queer and gender-fluid figures in Indian mythology, Siddharth Dube's No One Else: A Personal History of Outlawed Love and Sex in India (2015), and the anthology I Am the River (edited by Jerry Pinto) have contributed to a growing literature of queer self-narration that insists on the validity and dignity of non-normative lives. These autobiographical texts perform a crucial cultural function: they make visible lives that have been rendered invisible, and in doing so they challenge the dominant narratives of Indian identity that have defined the nation as essentially heterosexual and gender-binary.

In fiction, younger writers have increasingly moved away from the tragic or apologetic modes that characterised earlier queer writing toward narratives of queer joy, desire, and community. Anthologies such as The Queer South Asian Literary Reader and many of the short stories published in literary magazines like Out of Print and Helter Skelter have demonstrated the range and vitality of contemporary queer Indian fiction in English. These texts engage with the intersections of queerness with caste, religion, disability, and diaspora in ways that challenge any monolithic account of queer Indian identity.

Conclusion

Queer voices in Indian Writing in English have travelled a remarkable distance — from the enforced obliquity of coded desire under colonial law to the confident self-articulation of contemporary fiction, drama, poetry, and memoir. This trajectory is not simply one of progressive liberation; it is marked by reversals, negotiations, and persistent tensions between indigenous traditions of gender multiplicity and imported Western categories of sexual identity, between the demands of literary aesthetics and the politics of representation, between the queer individual's claim to subjectivity and the collective identities — of community, nation, caste, and religion — that contest that claim.

The writers examined in this paper — Roy, Seth, Rao, Dattani, Chandra, and the growing cohort of contemporary queer voices — have used the resources of literary English to articulate experiences that dominant Indian culture has sought to silence, criminalise, or contain. In doing so, they have not only expanded the representational range of Indian fiction but have also intervened in the political and cultural debates about what it means to be Indian, to have a body, to desire, and to belong. Queer Indian writing in English is, in this sense, not a literature of the margin but a literature of the centre — one that reveals the suppressed contradictions and constitutive exclusions on which the fantasy of a unified national identity depends.

As India continues to negotiate the aftermath of the 2018 judgment — in a social landscape where legal decriminalisation has not yet translated into widespread social acceptance — the literary imagination remains an indispensable resource. Queer Indian writing in English gives form to lives that are still, for many, unlivable in the open. In doing so, it performs the oldest and most necessary function of literature: it insists on the reality and the value of human experience that would otherwise go unseen.

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