

Queer Identity and the Politics of Belonging in Contemporary Indian English Poetry

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Abstract: This article argues that contemporary Indian English poetry by queer writers is less a search for inclusion than a sustained interrogation of what it means to belong at all. Drawing on Nira Yuval-Davis's (2011) account of the politics of belonging, alongside queer theory from Foucault (1978), Butler (1990), Ahmed (2006) and Gopinath (2005), it reads the work of Hoshang Merchant, R. Raj Rao, Suniti Namjoshi, Agha Shahid Ali and Akhil Katyal against the shifting legal landscape shaped by Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. The article shows that these poets negotiate four overlapping sites of belonging: the family, the nation, the city and the literary tradition itself. Rather than seeking admission to these structures on existing terms, the poems recover suppressed archives of same-sex desire, remap urban and diasporic space, and expose the caste, class and gender exclusions that persist within queer communities. The article concludes that the decriminalisation of homosexuality in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018) did not resolve the question of belonging; instead, it opened a new poetic terrain in which legal citizenship and affective belonging remain productively at odds.

Keywords: *Queer poetry, Indian English literature, belonging, Section 377, diaspora, caste, Hoshang Merchant, Akhil Katyal.*

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Introduction

To belong is to be claimed by something larger than oneself: a family, a community, a nation, a language. For queer subjects in India, each of these claims has historically come with conditions. The family expects marriage and heirs; the nation, until 2018, criminalised "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code; and the literary canon of Indian English poetry, shaped by figures such as Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan and Jayanta Mahapatra, rarely made space for open articulations of same-sex desire. Queer poets writing in English have therefore had to ask not only *who am I?* but *where, and to whom, do I belong?*

This question has a particular charge in the Indian context because English itself occupies an ambivalent position. It is at once a colonial inheritance, an elite marker of class, and a cosmopolitan medium that connects Indian writers to global queer discourse. Critics have long noted that queer writing in India is often accused of being a Western import, as though same-sex desire arrived with the English language (Vanita and Kidwai 2000). Queer Indian English poets thus face a double charge of inauthenticity: their desire is said to be foreign, and so is their medium. Much of the poetry examined here works to dismantle that charge, recovering indigenous traditions of same-sex love while also claiming English as an Indian language of intimacy.

The article proceeds in five movements. It first sets out a theoretical framework built around the politics of belonging. It then outlines the legal history that framed queer life in India from 1860 to 2018. Close readings follow of five poets whose careers span the period from the 1980s to the present: Hoshang Merchant, R. Raj Rao, Suniti Namjoshi, Agha Shahid Ali and Akhil Katyal. A final

section considers the intersections of caste and gender identity that complicate any single narrative of queer belonging. Throughout, the article paraphrases rather than reproduces the poems, directing readers to the collections cited.

Theoretical Framework: Queerness and the Politics of Belonging

Nira Yuval-Davis (2011) distinguishes between *belonging*, an emotional attachment to a place or group, and the *politics of belonging*, the boundary-making projects through which communities decide who is inside and who is outside. Belonging, in her account, operates on three levels: social location (gender, class, caste, sexuality), identification and emotional attachment, and the ethical and political values by which belonging is judged. This tripartite model is useful for reading queer poetry because it separates the feeling of home from the institutions that grant or withhold it. A queer poet may feel deeply Indian while being told, by law or by family, that their desire places them outside the national body.

Michel Foucault's (1978) argument that "the homosexual" emerged in the nineteenth century as a species, a new category of person produced by medical and legal discourse, helps explain why Section 377 mattered beyond the courtroom. The law did not merely punish acts; it helped produce an identity defined by criminality. Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity adds that identities are sustained through repeated acts rather than fixed essences. Poetry, as a form of repeated and stylised utterance, becomes one place where alternative identities can be rehearsed into being.

Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) offers a spatial vocabulary that suits the poems discussed here. Ahmed argues that heterosexuality functions as an orientation that shapes which paths are visible and which bodies feel "in place." To be queer is to be out of line with these paths, and therefore to experience space differently. Gayatri Gopinath's *Impossible Desires* (2005) extends this to South Asian diasporas, showing how queer desire is rendered "impossible" within both nationalist and diasporic imaginaries that rely on heterosexual reproduction to secure cultural continuity. Gopinath's insight that the home and the nation are mutually reinforcing structures is central to the readings below.

Finally, Jasbir Puar's (2007) concept of *homonationalism* warns that inclusion can carry its own costs. When a state embraces certain queer subjects, usually those who are affluent, urban and conforming, it may do so in ways that reinforce other exclusions. This concern becomes pressing in post-2018 India, where legal recognition coexists with persistent violence against trans, Dalit and working-class queer people. José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) notion of queerness as a horizon not yet reached completes the framework: much of this poetry imagines a belonging that does not yet exist, rather than seeking entry into one that does.

Historical and Legal Context

Section 377 was introduced by the British colonial administration in 1860 as part of the Indian Penal Code drafted under Thomas Babington Macaulay. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's anthology *Same-Sex Love in India* (2000) demonstrated that pre-colonial Sanskrit, Persian and Urdu literatures contained a rich vocabulary of same-sex affection, from the friendship of Krishna and Arjuna to the *rekhti* poetry of nineteenth-century Lucknow. Their work reframed the debate: homophobia, they suggested, was as much a colonial legacy as the law that encoded it. This archival recovery gave queer poets a usable past and a counter-argument to claims of foreignness.

The legal battle that followed moved through several stages. In *Naz Foundation v. Government of NCT of Delhi* (2009), the Delhi High Court read down Section 377 to exclude consensual adult relations. In *Suresh Kumar Koushal v. Naz Foundation* (2013), the Supreme Court reversed that judgment, describing LGBT people as a "minuscule fraction" of the population. The following year, *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* (2014) recognised transgender people as a "third gender" entitled to constitutional protection. Finally, in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018), a five-judge bench of the Supreme Court decriminalised consensual same-sex relations between adults. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2019 followed, though activists criticised its certification requirements.

Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan's edited volume *Because I Have a Voice* (2005) captured the activist mood of the years before *Naz*, insisting that queer politics in India was inseparable from broader struggles over caste, class and gender. Poetry tracked these shifts closely. Writing from the 1980s and 1990s often worked in the register of secrecy and coded desire; writing after 2009 increasingly addressed the law directly, and writing after 2018 began to ask what legal freedom could and could not deliver. The poets below can be read as responding to, and sometimes anticipating, each of these moments.

Hoshang Merchant: Sufi Eros and the Outsider as Poet

Hoshang Merchant is widely regarded as the first openly gay poet in Indian English, and his editorial work has been as consequential as his verse. His anthology *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India* (1999) gathered fiction, poetry and memoir into what was effectively the first public archive of modern Indian gay literature. A decade later, *Forbidden Sex/Texts: New India's Gay Poets* (2009) extended the project, presenting a new generation of writers. In both introductions, Merchant frames queer writing as a recovery of something lost rather than the invention of something new (Merchant 1999).

Merchant's own poetry is saturated with Sufi and Persianate imagery: the beloved as a young man, the tavern as a space of transgressive communion, the lover as a wandering mendicant. This choice is political. By rooting homoerotic desire in the mystical traditions of Rumi, Hafiz and the Indo-Persian ghazal, Merchant asserts that same-sex longing has always belonged to the subcontinent's literary imagination. His collection *Sufi Tavern* makes this lineage explicit, turning the Sufi drinking-house into a figure for a queer counter-public where conventional moral and religious boundaries dissolve.

Yet Merchant's poetry rarely settles into comfortable belonging. A Parsi born in Bombay who studied and lived in the United States, Europe and the Middle East before teaching in Hyderabad, he writes as a perpetual outsider. Minority religious identity, sexual identity and cosmopolitan displacement overlap in his work. His memoir *The Man Who Would Be Queen* (2011) describes the loneliness of a life lived at an angle to family and community. In Yuval-Davis's (2011) terms, Merchant possesses intense emotional attachment to Indian culture while being denied the social and political recognition that would make that attachment reciprocal.

The effect is a poetics of exile within the homeland. Merchant's speakers frequently address absent or departed lovers, and loss becomes the condition of queer existence. Ahmed's (2006) observation that queer bodies experience familiar spaces as disorienting fits this pattern well. Merchant claims a tradition, but he does so from its margins, and his poems suggest that the margin may be the only place where queer belonging can be honestly articulated.

R. Raj Rao: The City, Class and the Politics of the Closet

Where Merchant turns to mystical tradition, R. Raj Rao turns to the street. Rao's poetry, collected in volumes such as *Slide Show* (1992), is grounded in the public toilets, railway platforms, cinemas and cruising grounds of Bombay and Pune. His poems formed the basis of Riyad Vinci Wadia's short film *BomGay* (1996), often described as one of India's first gay films. The film's title, fusing the city's name with an identity category, signals Rao's central concern: queer belonging is made, and unmade, in urban space.

Rao's poems are notable for their refusal of romantic idealisation. Sex is depicted as furtive, often transactional, and shaped by the threat of police harassment and blackmail that Section 377 enabled. The city provides anonymity, and anonymity provides a kind of freedom, but it is a freedom without recognition. In Foucauldian terms, the law produced a population that could exist only in the interstices of public space (Foucault 1978). Rao's speakers belong to the city precisely by disappearing into it.

Class is equally central. Rao repeatedly stages encounters across class lines, between English-educated men and working-class partners who may not share their language of identity. These encounters expose the limits of the English word "gay" as a universal category. Many of the men in Rao's poems would not describe themselves as gay at all; they move between same-sex and heterosexual worlds without contradiction. This anticipates the argument of Rao's later critical work, *Criminal Love? Queer Theory, Culture, and Politics in India* (2017), which questions whether Western identity politics can be transplanted unchanged into Indian contexts.

Rao's significance for the politics of belonging lies in this scepticism. He suggests that the demand to "come out" and claim an identity presupposes a stable community waiting to receive the newly visible subject. For many Indian queer men, especially those without class privilege, no such community exists. Belonging, in Rao's poetry, is provisional, embodied and fleeting, located in a glance on a crowded train rather than in a political movement.

Suniti Namjoshi: Lesbian Fable and the Geography of Exile

Any account of queer Indian English poetry that focuses only on gay men risks reproducing the invisibility of women's desire. Suniti Namjoshi is the most important corrective. Born in Mumbai in 1941 and later based in Canada and Britain, Namjoshi developed a hybrid form of poem and fable that draws on the Panchatantra, Greek myth and Western fairy tale. *Feminist Fables* (1981) and *The Blue Donkey Fables* (1988) use animals and mythic figures to dramatise the experience of being different. *Because of India: Selected Poems and Fables* (1989) gathers much of this work, and its title announces belonging as a central question.

Namjoshi's fables are deceptively light. A creature who does not fit its herd, a monster who discovers that monstrosity is a matter of perspective, a woman who reimagines a classical myth from the point of view of its silenced figure: each enacts what Butler (1990) describes as the subversive repetition of inherited forms. By rewriting the fable, a didactic genre designed to transmit social norms, Namjoshi turns a tool of conformity into a tool of critique. Her collaboration with Gillian Hanscombe, *Flesh and Paper* (1986), a sequence of love poems between two women, made lesbian intimacy explicit at a time when it was nearly absent from Indian English writing.

Namjoshi's relation to India is marked by distance. Her move abroad was shaped partly by the impossibility of living openly as a lesbian in the India of her youth, and her poems repeatedly return to the subcontinent as a remembered, contested home. Gopinath's (2005) argument is especially relevant here: women's same-sex desire is doubly "impossible" because nationalist and diasporic cultures place women at the centre of reproducing the family and tradition. Namjoshi's work insists that a lesbian woman can claim India without accepting the gendered role India assigns her. Belonging, in her writing, is an act of imaginative reclamation rather than a status conferred.

Agha Shahid Ali: Diaspora, the Ghazal and the Lost Homeland

Agha Shahid Ali, the Kashmiri-American poet who died in 2001, occupies a complex place in this discussion. Ali was gay, a fact acknowledged by friends and critics, including Amitav Ghosh in his memorial essay "The Ghat of the Only World" (2002). Yet his poetry rarely names same-sex desire directly. Instead, it channels longing through the classical ghazal, a form whose

beloved is grammatically and conventionally ambiguous. In collections such as *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987), *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) and the posthumous *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* (2003), the beloved can be a man, a woman, God, or Kashmir itself.

This ambiguity is not evasion but strategy. The ghazal's tradition of an unattainable beloved allowed Ali to write desire that exceeds fixed categories. His anthology *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000) championed the form's discipline while opening it to new subjects. In Ali's hands, erotic longing and political grief merge: the speaker's yearning for a lover becomes indistinguishable from his yearning for a homeland devastated by conflict in the 1990s.

Ali's work therefore illuminates a dimension of belonging that legal narratives tend to miss. For the diasporic queer subject, home is doubly lost: geographically, through migration, and affectively, through a desire that the home culture could not acknowledge. Gopinath (2005) reads such texts as producing a "queer diaspora" that refuses the nostalgic, heterosexual image of homeland. Ali's Kashmir is not the pristine paradise of nationalist rhetoric but a wounded, plural place, and his queerness is woven into that plurality. He belongs to it through elegy, through the act of mourning what cannot be held.

Akhil Katyal and the Post-2009 Generation

A new generation of poets came of age during the legal turbulence between *Naz* (2009) and *Navtej Johar* (2018). Akhil Katyal, a Delhi-based poet, translator and scholar, is representative of this moment. His collections *Night Charge of the Pawns* (2015) and *How Many Countries Does the Indus Cross* (2019) combine colloquial wit with political urgency. His scholarly monograph, *The Doubleness of Sexuality: Idioms of Same-Sex Desire in Modern India* (2016), argues that Indian same-sex cultures have long operated through two registers at once: a language of identity imported through activism and English, and older, more fluid idioms of intimacy embedded in everyday life.

This "doubleness" informs Katyal's poetry. His speakers move easily between English, Hindi and Urdu, and between the vocabulary of queer rights and the vocabulary of ordinary affection. The poems frequently locate desire in specific Delhi neighbourhoods, metro stations and university campuses, mapping the city as a lived queer geography rather than a site of secrecy. Where Rao's Bombay offered anonymity, Katyal's Delhi offers visibility, though a visibility that remains vulnerable.

Katyal's work also responds directly to the law. Poems written around the *Koushal* reversal (2013) register the shock of a freedom granted and then withdrawn, and treat the courtroom as one more place where queer lives are discussed without queer voices. Katyal's broader political poems, including those addressing Kashmir, communal violence and the treatment of minorities, refuse to isolate queer politics from other struggles. In this he echoes the coalition politics of Narrain and Bhan (2005) and implicitly answers Puar's (2007) warning: a queer belonging bought at the cost of solidarity with other marginalised groups would be no belonging worth having.

The broader post-2009 field is expanding rapidly through small presses, literary magazines, spoken-word events and social media. Anthologies, Pride readings and online platforms have given younger poets an audience that earlier writers lacked. The

shift is from the lonely, coded voice of the 1980s to a networked, collective one. Yet the question of belonging persists in a new form: having won legal recognition, these poets ask whether family, religious community and the nation will extend the emotional recognition that law alone cannot command.

Intersections: Caste, Gender Identity and the Limits of Belonging

The poets discussed so far share certain privileges: English education, urban residence, and in most cases upper-caste or elite minority backgrounds. Yuval-Davis (2011) insists that belonging must be analysed intersectionally, since social location shapes who can claim which attachments. A queer politics that speaks only through English-language poetry risks reproducing the exclusions it opposes. The canon of queer Indian English poetry, like the wider canon of Indian English literature, has been disproportionately savarna and male.

Dalit queer writers and activists have pressed this critique in recent years, largely through essays, spoken-word performance and social media rather than published poetry collections. They argue that mainstream queer movements have often treated caste as a separate issue, when for Dalit queer people caste and sexuality are experienced simultaneously. Pride marches in metropolitan centres can feel as exclusionary as the families and villages from which many queer people flee. Here Puar's (2007) critique of homonationalism acquires a distinctly Indian inflection: inclusion within a respectable, upper-caste queer mainstream may leave caste hierarchy intact.

Transgender and hijra voices raise related challenges. Life narratives such as Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya* (2007) and A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) have shaped public understanding of trans lives more than poetry has, partly because they were written in Tamil and translated into English. Their presence in English translation highlights a broader point: much of the richest queer writing in India is produced in regional languages. Hijra communities, moreover, have their own long-standing structures of kinship, the guru-chela system, which offer a model of belonging outside the biological family. The NALSA judgment (2014) recognised trans identity in law, but the 2019 Act's certification process drew criticism for subjecting self-identification to bureaucratic approval.

These intersections suggest that the "politics of belonging" in queer Indian English poetry cannot be read solely through the lens of sexual identity. The most searching recent work recognises that English itself is a site of exclusion, and that the poet who writes in it bears responsibility to those whose stories are told in other languages, or not told at all.

Conclusion

Queer Indian English poetry has never simply asked to be let in. Across four decades, its poets have questioned the terms on which belonging is offered. Hoshang Merchant reclaimed a Sufi and Persianate tradition to prove that same-sex desire was always part of the subcontinent's imagination, while writing from its margins. R. Raj Rao located queer belonging in the anonymous spaces of the city and exposed the class assumptions behind the language of identity. Suniti Namjoshi rewrote the fable to make lesbian desire speakable and claimed India from a distance. Agha Shahid Ali fused erotic and political longing in the ghazal, belonging to Kashmir through elegy. Akhil Katyal and his

contemporaries mapped a visible queer geography and linked sexual freedom to wider solidarities.

Read together, these poets confirm Yuval-Davis's (2011) distinction between belonging as feeling and belonging as politics. The 2018 Navtej Singh Johar judgment changed the politics; it did not automatically change the feeling. Families, religious communities and many institutions continue to withhold recognition, and the benefits of legal change have been unevenly distributed across caste, class and gender. In this context, Muñoz's (2009) vision of queerness as a horizon remains apt. The poetry examined here does not describe a belonging that has been achieved. It imagines one that is still being made, in which home, nation and community are rebuilt to hold those they once excluded.

Future scholarship would benefit from reading Indian English queer poetry alongside work in Hindi, Urdu, Marathi, Bengali, Tamil and other languages, and from centring Dalit, Adivasi, trans and women's voices that the English canon has marginalised. Only such a multilingual and intersectional approach can do justice to the full range of queer belonging in contemporary India.

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