

**HOMOSEXUALITY IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE:  
QUEER PERSPECTIVES**

**Final Report of the Minor Research Project**

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## **Executive Summary of the Minor Project**

Literature, as an imitation of human action, often presents a picture of what man thinks, says, and does in the society. In literature, we find stories designed to portray human life and action through some characters who, by their words, action and reaction, convey certain messages for the purpose of education, information and entertainment. This aspect of literature reflecting society, when it comes to the Indian English literature is seen in the zenith.

English Literature in India has passed through several phases such as Indo-Anglian, Indo-English, Indian writing in English and recently Indian English literature which manifests modern thoughts, modern life, despite the utterances of fallacious reasoning, patriotic duty and political prejudices, it remains good enough and proves itself. It facilitates to focus on the readers' mental responsiveness and awareness. Many writers of/in global India are only too happy to portray versions of India consistent with Orientalist notions of Indian culture or over determined visions of the sexism of Indian culture. What we get in literature is a critique of overarching discourses of cultural authenticity that tend to hide the differences the nation is inherently structured by. Present-day Indian sexual identities are constructed out of the multiplicitious effects and perceptions of tradition, modernity, colonisation and globalisation that are more often than not in conflict with each other. This study attempts to analyse several contemporary queer writing in India and creates a starting point for discussions on India's queer sexuality.

Sexual minorities are epistemologically constructed as the other to the dominant heterosexuality; that is, the construction of both heterosexuality and homosexuality is contingent upon a binary relationship that upholds heterosexuality as the only way of knowing the world. The strong taboo against any form of sexuality which is outside the limits of heterosexuality prevents writers from addressing such issues. Daring steps were taken by the Indian English

writers to bring out the latent realities in the Indian society and presents sexual behaviours that breach the heteronormative social or symbolic boundaries.

With more authors choosing homosexual themes for their work, a 'same-sex story' no longer remains taboo for Indian writers. Earlier, novels on same-sex relationships were rare in Indian writing in English. But in the past couple of years, this scenario is undergoing a change. Vanita and Kidwai (2000) examine the uncharted territory of the Indian archive on homoerotic love. Queer scholar, Ruth Vanita's work on Indian sexualities is both prolific and covers a wide range of queer representations, from historical to the literary and popular culture. Mayur Patel's novel, 'Vivek and I', is about a teacher who fancies a student in his school. R Raj Rao, a professor of literature in Pune, wrote 'Hostel Room 131' — a novel tracing a budding love story in the hostel of an engineering college. Incidentally, his novel, 'The Boyfriend' (2003) is among the first gay novels written in English in India. Rahul Mehta's 'Quarantine', a collection of short stories was published in 2010. Continuing the trend, Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla's novel 'The Exiles', is about a homosexual man's extra-marital relationship. While queer fiction in English flourishes, there is relatively less noise about it in regional languages.

Queer theory emerged in the early 1990s out of gay and lesbian studies and feminist studies. It assumes that sexual identities are a function of representations. It also questions the traditional binary constructions of sexuality. Queer theory mainly explores the contestations of the categorization of gender and sexuality. Queer theorists claim that identities are not fixed because identities consist of varied components and to categorize an individual on the basis of just one characteristic is, therefore, wrong. They focus on the problem of classifying individuals on the basis of gender; therefore queer is less an identity than a critique of identity. In the present study, the term "queer" designates a range of acts, identities, propensities, affectivities and

sentiments which fissure heteronormativity. Only the word queer can adequately capture the fluidity and amazing plasticity of the labile categories of gendered identifications and sexual identities.

The present study also dispels the myth that alternative sexual orientation is a purely western idea and issues of 'erotic justice' are alien to Indian and South Asian cultures. Queering here is not equated with only protests through queer art, avant-garde experimentation and lifestyle identity politics but includes a 'critical sexuality perspective' which foregrounds experiences of subaltern sexual subjects like 'working class lesbians', *hijras* and *kothis* to map the agenda of sexual transformation and erotic justice.

More than the manner in which the queer people are presented in Indian English Literature, it aims at discussing the changed possibilities of identity, culture and sex and its discourse when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent of the privileged example of a sexual culture. The heteronormativity which makes heterosexuality the privileged social norm is contested through the discourse of queer sexualities. Indian homosexuality sprouted at the same time as the recognition of homophobia in the colonial rule. Thus, writings on homosexuality in India have had to face the repercussions of homophobic discrimination. Another blow to homosexuality in India is the seriousness with which family life is viewed. As a result, homosexuality remains an unexplored subject, and when there are references to homosexuality, they often wear a homophobic garb. Thus, in 1947, Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's Malayalam novel *Shabdangal* (Voices) was condemned as immoral, because it depicted male homosexuality. It told the story of a soldier, and his love for a cross-dressed male. At the end, the soldier dies in a sexually transmitted disease. Likewise, Kamleshwar's Hindi novel *Ek Sadak Sattavan Galiyan* created a tumult because it depicted a truck driver and a part time bandit

keeping a young man. Here too, like the soldier in Basheer's novel, the protagonist is not a part of the mainstream, but an outlaw. In Chandrakant Khote's Marathi novel *Ubhayan Vai Avyaya* (1970), the protagonist's addiction to anal sex is depicted as a bad habit similar to liquor and drugs. Of course, examples like these were few and far between. There was no pro-gay fiction, and most of the time the author/s failed to understand the complexities of queer issues. For them, homosexuality was just another form of evil.

The studied silence maintained by the Indian academic intelligentsia on the subject of homosexuality can be cited as a reason for the homophobic attitudes represented in fiction. With a few notable exceptions, Indian academics always contributed to the myth that homosexuality is unknown in India, by ignoring it completely. This leads us to conclude that original studies, on the subject, in India have been done outside academics. One important book in this respect is *The World of Homosexuals* by Shakuntala Devi. Apart from recounting personal narratives of what it means to be in closet in India, the book goes on to survey the scholarship on homosexuality in history, law, psychiatry, religion, and culture. The book ends with a call for decriminalization as well as full and complete acceptance, not tolerance and not sympathy by the heterosexual population, which will enable homosexuals to come out of hiding and lead dignified, secure lives.