The Invisible Lives of Indian Lesbians: An Overview of Literature

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Abstract
This study builds on the growing body of research on queer studies in South Asia, with a particular focus on India, by examining the existing literature available on the lesbian experience. Current studies on queer sexuality predominantly focus on male homosexuality and lesbian discourse has often found itself on the periphery of gender studies and queer studies in the South Asian context, which points towards an apparent gender divide, heteronormative patriarchal structures, and lesbian erasure. Indian lesbians endure numerous and intersecting forms of oppression, including those based on race, caste, class, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic background. The invisibility and marginalization of lesbians within nationalist, patriarchal, and religious contexts is multidimensional; there is no space for any kind of sexuality that is based on women's desire for other women, which is further proven through the limited representation of lesbians in literary writings and popular culture like film and television. By drawing on a theoretical review of the literature currently available, this research develops an understanding and overview of the marginalization and invisibility experienced by lesbians in India, especially focusing on the aftermath of Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (1996). By exploring its historical, social, and cultural background, the study interrogates why such hegemonic structures exist even now. Through this analysis, the study aims to ask questions and initiate conversations about the violence of heteronormativity against South Asian lesbians. It examines how they resist institutions that negate their sexuality, and what propels them to move from a place of marginalization and invisibility towards acceptance and healing and build viable non-heterosexual life possibilities and a queer tomorrow.

Keywords
lesbian, South Asian, invisibility, literature review, Deepa Mehta, *Fire*

Introduction

Queer sexualities have a complex relationship with South Asia. There is historical evidence of the existence of numerous sexual and gender identities, as seen in the erotic sculptures of Khajuraho, a temple city with medieval Hindu and Jain temples, as well as in various historical texts, paintings, and myths. Scholars like Madhavi Menon (2018), Devdutt Pattanaik (2017), Rohit Dasgupta (2011), Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (2008), and Indrani Chatterjee (2012) extensively discuss the presence of fluid identities and desires in ancient India, stressing the multiple interpretations of their religious, spiritual and mystical connections. However, there are blatant acts of hostility, repression, discrimination, and violence against members of the LGBTQ+ community due to strict patriarchal and religious structures in the contemporary history of South Asia in the form of social exile, inaccessibility to legal rights, forced marriages, and homelessness.

The legal provision criminalizing same-sex activities was introduced in all the British colonies in the form of Section 377 during Imperial rule, which was initially modelled on England's 1533 Buggery Act. No such law existed in South Asian nations which penalized or executed anyone for homosexuality, unlike today when LGBTQ+ are "discursively exiled as Others and materially exiled through permanent deprivation of citizenship rights" (Bacchetta 146) in South Asia. Queer studies suggest that in pre-nineteenth-century India[1] "love between men and between women, even when disapproved of, was not actively persecuted" (Vanita and Kidwai). After independence, former colonies such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka adopted the law criminalizing sexual activities "against the order of nature," that is, against sodomy in their respective penal codes. In a historic judgement, Section 377 was overruled and decriminalized in 2018 in India, with the Supreme Court of India calling the law "irrational, indefensible, and manifestly arbitrary" (Rajagopal). However, implications persist as the law left a lasting cultural impact.

The British colonizers instituted the Indian Penal Code (IPC) in India in 1860, and Section 377 criminalized all sexual acts against the order of nature, including consensual homosexual sex between adults as unconstitutional, under 'Unnatural Offences.'[2] It is crucial to note here that

[1] 'India' here indicates the Indian subcontinent, which encompasses the now-independent nations of India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka; commonly used interchangeably as South Asia.

[2] Under 'Unnatural Offences,' Section 377 of the IPC reads: "Whoever, voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be

in Section 377, lesbians remain largely unaddressed as the law, based on a technicality, only implied homosexual men and bestiality with animals. This absence is noted by Giti Thadani, who argues, "Criminalizing lesbianism would have meant making it visible, which would have been tantamount to saying that women were not fully under male control" (79). Despite the legal oversight, lesbians were still implicated in various social and legal ways, underscoring the legacies of postcolonialism and the continuing struggles for LGBTQ+ rights.

In South Asian nations, the invisibility and marginalization of lesbians is multi-dimensional. Often considered as a pathological deviation, lesbian voices are silenced in strict patriarchal national contexts, and even across the globe as "sexual agency is considered exclusively male" and "lesbian sex is not outlawed because it is not imagined to exist" (Bacchetta 108). Women's role in nationalist agendas is varied. They are framed as biological reproducers, embodiment of culture, and "as carriers of collective honour" (Yuval-Davis 177). That is why the situation of lesbians is further complicated, leading to their construction "as internal Others refusing to play a role in the heteronormative biological and cultural reproduction of the nation; as threats to […] heteronormative national culture" (Bacchetta 109).

Within queer studies in the South Asian context, lesbian discourse has often found itself on the periphery, with less attention towards the cis lesbian experience; the same holds true for their existence and representation in cultural productions. This points towards an apparent gender divide and lesbian erasure. Hence, this overview provides a historical, legal, and social context for the marginalization and invisibility experienced by lesbians in South Asia, especially India. Through a thorough literature review, it will also map the terrain of mainstream cultural productions responsible for highlighting the existence of lesbians. It attempts to interrogate why such hegemonic structures exist even now and aims to understand how lesbian women build viable life possibilities outside heteronormative mandates for themselves. The paper is delineated into three sections: the initial section will give a comprehensive overview of the legacies of colonial rule post-independence up until the 1990s; the second section will situate the lesbian within a national, social, and racial context, as well as explore the intersections of migration and sexuality; and the third section will explore the release of Deepa Mehta's

punished with imprisonment of life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine."

film *Fire* in the late 1990s and its immediate aftermath along with contemporary lesbian representation, activism, and solidarity networks.

The Legacies of Colonial Past and its Cultural Implication on Lesbians

Brinda Bose, in her work "Notes on Queer Politics in South Asia and Its Diaspora" argues that India emerges as central to the cultural representations of gay and lesbian cultures in South Asia because it occupies a (geo)political centrality in the region (498). Most South Asian nations have had a shared history and culture for a long time. This is because the geographical boundaries between nations have been arbitrarily marked over time, the latest boundary being the one marked in 1947 upon the Partition of British India, giving rise to two separate countries—India and Pakistan, parts of which have been disputed ever since. Vanita and Kidwai believe that depending on one's point of view, "every geographical and social unit shades into its neighbours, and all boundaries are fluid and shifting" (xxv). Rohit Dasgupta notes that since the geographical boundaries of any country are marked randomly through time, "the region which we now call South Asia despite its linguistic, cultural, and religious differences has enough commonality through its shared literary and cultural traditions to merit being studied under the aegis of a single nation" (652). However, we must not assume that since these nations hold enough commonality, the struggle, subjectivities, and queer cultural productions can be used interchangeably when mapping queer archives in South Asia. Plenty of scholarship has suggested that cultural identities are best seen as evolving and developing, which challenges the assumption of a fixed identity, allowing it "to be seen as a process rather than a historical fact" (Mehta 15). These arguments form our understanding of South Asia and India. So, while I focus on India for this overview, historical, social, and cultural aspects resonate with other South Asian countries as well.

The existence of fluid sexual and gender identities in pre-independent India and the imposition of Section 377 implies that India turned into a sexually repressed society under colonial rule and was unable to go back to its former state. India, a region where there was a "polyvalence of gender identities and sexual desire" (N. Menon 96) according to historical archives, began its disciplining of queer sexualities through legal and social interventions. In the nineteenth century, Vanita and Kidwai argue that "a minor homophobic voice which was largely ignored by mainstream society in pre-colonial India […] becomes a dominant voice" (96). However, Bose notes that "although this understanding does not do justice

to the complexity of postcolonial inheritances, it is particularly pertinent to fixing a timeline for the history of queer—or same sex, or LGBT—love on the subcontinent" (498), because Section 377 of the IPC has been central to LGBTQ+ community wars and victories .

Defending the need to analyse and study women's experiences separately from men's, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai point out: "experiences of men loving men and women loving women have necessarily been very different since men had greater mobility, freedom, resources and power than women" (xxvii). Gay men have more resources and better access to public spaces than women do. Women are seen less in public spaces and even in literature, especially of South Asian nations, where they tend to occupy the private spaces of the home. Domestic or private spaces can also be likened to the metaphorical 'closet' which pertains to a Eurocentric narrative, and 'coming out' of the said closet would mean becoming visible and reclaiming space in a heteronormative society. In the decades before 1998, when *Fire* was released in India, the figure of the lesbian was not visible in Indian culture and works representing her came from women writers who were canonized within postcolonial Indian literary studies under the category of 'feminist writers' or 'women writers' (Nair 3).

Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt" (1942) is one of the first and foremost examples of queer writings in India which highlighted same-sex desire between women. Chughtai, an Urdu writer in the pre-partition era, became the subject of obscenity charges by the colonial British government for her representation of lesbian desire in "The Quilt." The short story can be considered a "test case for the stakes in regulating female same-sex desire" (Nair 3). "The Quilt" is an account of a young girl who witnesses a sexual encounter between the rich Begum and her servant, Rabbu. The story is read and discussed widely by feminist scholars throughout the globe because of what Nair considers Chughtai's "quintessential feminist move" of "refus[ing] to accept lesbian desire" (3) by being ambiguous about the narrator's description of what she saw under the quilt. Due to this ambiguity of language, the story has different endings in different translated versions, and eventually helped Chughtai to defend herself in court. Malayalam writer and poet Kamala Das is another famous writer who did not shy away from representing lesbian desire. Her most notable works that portray desire between women are her autobiography, *My Story* (1976), and the short story "The Sandal Trees" (1988). Her progressive stance on sexuality was ahead of her time and her writing is infused with an open and honest treatment of female sexuality free from any sense of

guilt, a feat which was not seen in the mainstream during the time in which she wrote.

Writings on female homosexuality have come a long way since Chughtai's "The Quilt." Studies have suggested that up until the mid-point of the 20th century, anthropological studies of sexuality "focused on Other cultures […] followed by a disciplinary silence, from the 1940s through the late 60s" (Walks 14). For a long time, there was nothing substantial on lesbian scholarship, barring a few magazine articles or interviews. An in-depth engagement with the invisible community was lacking. However, by the time the 1990s rolled in, the tide began to turn. Contemporary scholarly debates around sexuality, same-sex desires, gender identity and transness have been greatly influenced by the historical presence of sexually diverse histories in India.

The deployment of different genres also served an important function in bringing marginalised voices to light. Autobiography played a central role in lesbian representation and provided a unique approach to lesbian literature, as we see in the writings of Chughtai and Das. It is also the genre explored by Suniti Namjoshi, India's earliest 'out' lesbian writer even before the 1990s. Namjoshi, a poet and a fabulist who now lives in England, has written a considerable number of novels, poetry, and short fiction since 1981. However, autobiography's "relative marginalization in postcolonial Indian literary studies has […] meant that Namjoshi has been bypassed entirely" (Nair 19). Far from any project of individualism, for Namjoshi the autobiography became a space to engage with questions of feminist solidarity in the face of patriarchal and (neo)colonial control (14), and her work *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000) traces her experiences of caste, class, and sexuality in India and abroad. Throughout the 1980s, Namjoshi authored books like *Feminist Fables* (1981), *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares* (1984), *The Conversations of Cow* (1985), *Flesh and Paper* (1986), and *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989). Being an openly lesbian writer of Indian origin, she explored intersections of femininity and sexuality in her works. Using another form of literature, Namjoshi's contemporary Vijay Tendulkar, with his Marathi play, "Mitrachi Goshta" (1981, Engl. transl. "A Friend's Story," 2001), also created quite a stir when it was first performed in 1981. With this play Tendulkar tried to break taboos around homosexuality by depicting a lesbian couple amidst a very conventional society.

In the late 1990s, many writers began publishing works about lesbian desire in various forms, not limited to novels or autobiographies. In the wave of queer organizing of lesbians in India, another one of India's 'out' lesbian writers, Giti Thadani published her work, *Sakhiyani: Lesbian*

Desire in Ancient and Modern India (1996). Her work "directly confronts xenophobic-lesbophobic nationalist discourses (left, right and center) that designate Indian lesbians as 'not Indian'" (Bacchetta 117). Shortly after the release of Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (1996), which will be discussed later, Ashwini Sukthankar's *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* (1999) was published. It served as the first anthology on lesbian writing from India at the time of its publication and contained lesbian experiences and stories from across the country, enabling discussions on lesbian life, identity, and desire. The anthology also complicated the category 'lesbian' through the voices of multiple contributors, "each of whom approaches the definition of lesbian desire and identity differently" (Nair 23). A few years later, Maya Sharma's *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Unprivileged India* (2006) highlighted the intersection of class and sexuality by focusing on ten stories from the economically unprivileged stratas of Indian society. It pointed out the fact that the choice of sexuality is often related to class and the privilege of 'coming out' is only with the educated urban elite.

Lack of terminology and the usage of the words 'lesbian' and 'homosexual' by modern and urban South Asians made it easier to reduce lesbian and homosexual relationships to a 'Western' influence. However, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (2000), asserted the opposite by presenting an array of writings and instances of same-sex love in the Indian subcontinent from over 2000 years of literature, including ancient Indian materials, medieval materials from Sanskritic and Perso-Urdu traditions as well as modern Indian materials, rendering the "western influence" theory inaccurate. The rich and varied ancient history of the Indian subcontinent led to the development of various definitions of same-sex love throughout history, none of which were widely accepted. This paradox persists since urban women who have had access to the term 'lesbian' do not identify with Indigenous terminology, and rural women who have never heard words like 'gay' or 'lesbian', do not associate with them (Vanita 48). Despite publications of multiple fictional accounts recounting the lesbian experience, acknowledgment of female homosexuality continued to be resisted while intersecting structures of gender, sexuality, religion, class, caste, location, and economic status complicated lesbian visibility.

Silent Hostilities and Diasporic Imaginaries

Within nationalist and religious contexts, "there is no social space for any kind of sexuality which is based on women's pleasure or for women who

love and desire other women" (Thadani 122). Lesbianism is a threat to patriarchal and hegemonic structures; thus, women's sexual behaviour becomes controlled and marginalized, and sexuality that results in procreation is the only form that is deemed acceptable. There are many instances where lesbian identity is suppressed through violence and hostility, as women have very little agency in making their voices heard within patriarchy. Constructing the lesbian identity becomes a difficult feat in such contexts where the figure of the lesbian remains a secret due to society's suppression of their sexuality or women's suppression of their own desires. Terry Castle, in *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (1993), calls this "self-ghosting," a concept that ultimately leads to lesbian invisibility. Gust Yep expands more on this in "The Violence of Heteronormativity," noting that "heteronormativity is so powerful that its regulation and enforcement are carried out by the individuals themselves through socially endorsed and culturally accepted forms of soul murder" (22).

In a study conducted by Gomathy N. B. and Bina Fernandez, wherein they analyse personal narratives of lesbian and bisexual women to understand the violence they are subjected to, the authors contend that the erasure of lesbian sexuality is processed through acts of "silent hostility" (41) which mostly stem from familial spaces. A form of emotional violence, silent hostility involves acts of neglect, denial of relationships, violation of privacy, and control of mobility, among others. Many women are forced to marry, or if the family knows about their sexuality, there are instances of lavender marriages – marriages of convenience between gay men and lesbian women – as a means to avoid shame in society. Further adding to this invisibility is difficulty finding safe social spaces, especially in cities that are developing and small towns, instilling feels of alienation in queer people, which often lead to migration to metropolitan cities. However, it is important to note that mobility for women in small towns is often restricted. Works documenting the erasure of lesbian sexuality also "identif[y] the familial home as the primary site of homophobic oppression and in some cases, of violence" (Choudhuri 141). The use of "silence" as a form of violence is also addressed by Sutanuku Bhattacharya in her work about the marginalized status of queer persons assigned female at birth (108).

Representation in films and TV plays a huge role in bringing further visibility, as creative cultures are "directly in conversation with the political and social climate of a land, and a leap in political awareness finds multiple, immediate creative expressions" (Bose 499). In recent years, there has been a gradual increase in lesbian representation in films and

TV. Many filmmakers have sought to challenge societal norms through lesbian portrayal but stereotypes, tokenism, and conservative attitudes continue to persist, despite the concerted efforts. The queer community of the Indian diaspora has also been a source of the subcontinent's queer imagination, with a range of literary and cultural productions which intersect geographical displacement and sexuality. The location of a person, both geographic and social, is crucial in understanding the construction of a queer identity. In her essay "Why Queer Diaspora?" Meg Wesling approaches these concepts by "considering how the contemporary conditions of geographical mobility—the diasporic condition that attends the circumstance of globalization—produce new experiences and understandings of sexuality and gender identity" (31).

While diaspora as a historical and contemporary condition has embraced issues of globalization, transnationalism, hybridity, and multiculturalism, the intersection of gender and diaspora and the way they have impacted each other has been less explored until recently. One of the earliest works on the experiences of the South Asian LGBTQ+ community is *A Lotus of Another Color: An Unfolding of the South Asian Gay and Lesbian Experience* (1993), edited by Rakesh Ratti. This collection of 46 personal accounts of men and women from South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, is one of the first books which was published for the American reader. Ratti also challenges the marginalization of gay and lesbian South Asians based on the belief that their identities are products of Western influence.

In *Impossible Desires: Queer Desires and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005), Gayatri Gopinath argues that the "space of public culture in diaspora emerges as a contested terrain where heteronormative notions of female sexuality are both enacted and challenged" (161). The transnational queer subject imagines the adopted homeland as a utopia where differences are resolved, or at least tolerated, "a landscape of dream and fantasy that answers to their desires" (Fludernik xi). This "diasporic imaginary," theorized by Vijay Mishra in his work "The Diasporic Imaginary: Common Traditions and New Developments" (1996), closely resembles what Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism" in her work of the same name (2011), i.e. the inconsistency between the good life that was promised and the everyday experiences that shape the life of the queer migrant.

The "homophobic underpinnings of colonialism and nationalism are often replicated in the mainstream discourses of the diaspora, rendering the queer diasporic subject as the 'inauthentic' or 'demonized' other" (Choudhuri 106). It is no longer possible to make a clean break with one's

history simply by immigrating to a different country, “on the contrary, one's ethnic affiliation with all its attendant responsibilities re-emerges—a ghost that has followed the emigrant and catches up with him after arrival” (Fludernik xxii), which is true, especially in the case of women and the queer community. The diasporic subject stays in a state of in-betweenness, between the old and the new, which influences the way they construct their identity. Gopinath studies queerness within the diaspora in her above-mentioned work by juxtaposing a range of cultural productions, including literature, films, music, and art, and she illustrates how the female queer subject struggles to locate themselves in spaces of home, nation, and the diaspora. She analyses this ignorance and impossibility of the female queer subject in South Asia. Departing from the traditional queer subject who is usually a cis male, she finds and marks the “impossible,” that is, the queer diasporic female subject. The notion of “impossibility” is used as “a way of signaling the unthinkability of a queer female subject position within various mappings of nation and diaspora” (14).

Even when non-heteronormative spaces do exist in the diaspora, they are characterized by a certain whiteness, which gives the South Asian woman the impression that she is out of place. South Asian women also struggle for authenticity and acceptance from white women who generally acquire the lesbian spaces in the West. Rani Kawale notes that white female bodies are perceived as “the somatic authentic lesbian norm,” while South Asian women are “likely to be seen as (1) heterosexual or bisexual, rather than lesbian, (2) ‘inferior’ and/or (3) exoticized ‘sex objects’” (Kawale 184) and are often stereotyped according to the notions of traditional Asian sensibilities. This makes obvious the influence of race in the way Indian lesbians are perceived and approached in public spaces, further indicating that the issues faced by different races and cultures require different critical approaches and cannot simply be generalized. Hence, lesbian studies in India benefits by taking inspiration from queer-of-colour critique—an intersectional approach to queer theory which marked its beginning with the Black and Latina scholarship—by critically analysing the intersections of lesbians with the diverse ethnic, caste, class, and religious issues central to India.

Lesbianism as a Western Import and the ‘Inauthenticity’ of *Fire*

In her seminal work, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980), Adrienne Rich argues that heterosexuality is not “natural” and is instead an institution imposed upon many cultures and societies to place women in a subordinate position, making way for the “male right of physical, economical, and emotional access” to women (647). She further states that “women have been burdened with embodying and preserving the sacredness of the home; it has reflected male needs, male fantasies about women, and male interest in controlling women—particularly in the realms of sexuality and motherhood” (634). This resistance to female sexuality and agency is the “hallmark of patriarchy wherein women’s bodies are used as pawns to negotiate masculinities and power” (Ahmed-Ghosh 377). The state, religion, and society are therefore perceived as being threatened by any deviation from the “normative prescriptions” (377) of women's sexuality, which is evident in the amount of scholarship based on women’s sexuality and homosexuality.

Bose comments that “all histories of South Asian queer literature while being traced back to precolonial times, find their watershed years toward the end of the twentieth century when the awareness of rights-based struggles around sexual identities began taking shape” (498), of which one landmark case is the release of *Fire* (1996), a film by Indo-Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta. Based on the lives of two middle-class women in New Delhi, the film shows how constructs of gender and sexuality can be challenged from the viewpoint of middle-class women in urban India, who exist in culturally acceptable forms of hetero-patriarchal spaces. The film is the first mainstream Bollywood film which explicitly shows the lesbian relationship between two sisters-in-law, namely Radha and Sita (also names of two Hindu Goddesses), played by Nandita Das and Shabana Azmi respectively. While reviewers praised the film as “gutsy” and “pathbreaking,” right-wing Hindu protestors called out the inauthenticity of the portrayal and multiple claims were made that lesbians do not exist in India. Protestors called lesbianism a “Western” phenomenon that is “inauthentic” and “alien” to Indian culture, an example of their failure to recognize the female queer subject (Raval and Jain). This technique of 'othering,' Giti Thadani notes, “functions as a form of exile, rendering invisible and excommunicating anything which may be seen as representative of homosexual and homoerotic traditions” (6). This othering resonates with the civilizing missions of colonialism that continue to plague postcolonial cultures. The position of Mehta as an Indian Canadian further added to the argument. However, the film’s “exclusively Indian setting has positioned it away from explicit discussions of how Indian diaspora views or represents Indian sexualities” (Mahn and Watt 224). The film also avoided using the word “lesbian” to reject Western identity categories and

terminology that was not readily available to the masses at the time. Simultaneously, it also sparked debates criticizing the director about portraying lesbian desire between Sita and Radha as the outcome of cloistered and lonely marriages, which Mehta has defended saying that the two women would have fallen in love despite their situations ('Keeping the Flame Alive').

It can be noted that post-independence Hindu nationalists were quite anxious about their 'queer past' made visible by the "western epithet of India being the 'land of the Kamasutra'" (Dasgupta 666). It is not surprising that *Kamasutra* is perhaps the most frequently cited artefact to support the contention that ancient India was a sex-positive society and was tolerant of alternative sexualities. The argument that ancient India accommodated a wide range of sexual behaviours was "met with unease and shame," which Rohit Dasgupta sees as a "response to the colonial educationist's attacks on the constructs of Indian masculinity and sexuality" (666). An illustration of this anxiety can be seen in the aftermath of the movie *Fire*, which brought forward a shift in the dynamics of queer representation and the perception of women's sexuality in the South Asian context. Before *Fire*, there had been literary productions from authors like Chughtai, Das, and Namjoshi. However, the anger over the film's portrayal of love between two women changed queer politics in India and further paved the way for gay and lesbian rights' activists to be vocal about their existence. In a feat that was never seen before, the protests unknowingly brought together opponents of the Hindu Right: people defending freedom of expression, human rights activists, and gay and lesbian rights activists supporting the same cause.

There was a visible political assertion in the 1990s which challenged heteronormativity implicitly and explicitly, the credit of which is attributed to the growing awareness of the AIDS epidemic that made it increasingly legitimate to talk about sex from perspectives not limited to law and medicine. Though in their nascent stages, counter-heteronormative movements had begun in India which allowed narratives of people with queer gender identities and sexualities to emerge. Media played a significant role in making sexuality increasingly visible in the public space. During the protests around *Fire*, writer and activist Maya Sharma recounted making the poster with the slogan "Indian and Lesbian" to counter the argument that lesbianism is a Western idea (Sagara). The implication of this was huge for women across India who saw the poster and also identified with the desires that were portrayed in the film, but could not fathom that such desires could even exist (Dave). It became the first visible expression of women's choice concerning their own sexual

expression. This is perhaps one of the reasons why, when the Hindu Right violently opposed *Fire* for depicting a sexual affair between two women, there was a sufficiently self-aware community demonstrating in public in defence of freedom of expression and against homophobia. This was just the start of such counter-heteronormative movements in India. It was in the 1990s when such a movement acquired "a self-identity, increasing visibility and confidence" (N. Menon 4).

The entrance of the figure of the lesbian into mainstream Indian culture and fiction also intervenes in a changing public culture in which sex is marked differently from the previous decades (Nair 2). In the 1990s, attitudes towards sexuality saw a change due to the rising consumer class and economic liberalization. The 'new woman' was celebrated for being more open with her sexuality and the overt departure from the usual conservative approach. However, ironically, cultural ideology still coerced women into heterosexual marriage and motherhood during this era. The lesbian's sexuality redefines the very idea of the 'new woman.' Her sexuality, even when not overt, suggests a disengagement from heterosexuality, even when marriage and motherhood still occur (2).

However, one has to note that the women's movement was not always a natural ally to lesbian politics in the beginning. Even though there has been a significant shift in that alliance in later years, it was still not without its problems. There continued to be an argument that suggested that sexuality was less urgent than the bigger issues that faced the women's movement, ignoring intersectionality completely. The dominant feminist movement "has cited the lesbian within the context of 'Western liberalization'" (Thadani 93), and lesbian relations are often dismissed as an experiment or a passing phase borne out of loneliness or attributed to the lack of heterosexual spaces. Due to the strict gender policing in the South-Asian context arising out of social and religious rules, homosociality is more easily accepted. The women portrayed in *Fire* also do not try to claim a separate space for themselves and use the arrangements of homosociality to claim their desires for one another until they are discovered, which leads to their exile. Thadani argues that "acceptance is given only because the homosocial relationship is presumed to be non-sexual" (97), because of which many women are forced to have a closeted existence inside the four walls of their domestic spaces. Such complexities lead one to believe that while lesbian behaviour can exist in society, lesbian identity cannot. Another related example can be seen in Ismat Chughtai's representation of the *zenana* (female quarters) in her short story "The Quilt". The *zenana* uses the "all-woman core of the hetero-

patriarchal household and its associated homosociality, to camouflage transgressive desire" (Choudhuri 37).

Even though many contemporary South Asian writers now discuss lesbian identity and desire by engaging in overt discussions, more often than not "their works are marked by a deferral rather than the naming of the lesbian" (6), which was established first by Chughtai in "The Quilt." As Sridevi K. Nair notes, such deferral can also "tak[e] the form of centring the lower-caste Hindu, the working-class woman, and the Muslim in favour of the lesbian" (6). These are groups are already treated as second to upper-caste middle-class Hindu males, who have long stood as the dominant subject of the Indian nation. These works further question the association of belonging by bringing a new perspective to the phrase "Indian and lesbian." This strategy is used to respond to right-wing nationalists who "deemed the lesbian un-Indian by showing that their exclusion of the lesbian from the realm of culture only extends the longstanding exclusion of many other social groups from the purview of 'Indian' identity"(6).

Although *Fire* initiated the dialogues around gender and sexuality and paved the way for further narratives on Indian lesbians, it only resulted in some short and independent films. Lesbian representation was scant in mainstream cinema, with Karan Razdan's *Girlfriend* (2004) the only other portrayal Indian cinema saw for years. However, the film was heavily criticized for tokenism and its stereotypical representation of lesbians and lesbianism as a result of childhood sexual abuse. Since then, digital cultures have played a significant role in the articulation of queer characters in Indian films and web series, as well as in "art, media [...] on the internet and in other cultural spaces; many of which are created and produced by queer people themselves" (Narrain and Bhan 20). Recent lesbian films have started using Western terminology like 'gay,' 'lesbian,' and 'homosexual' in order to make them available to the masses. Filmmakers have also started portraying same-sex desire as an essentialist sentiment rather than a socially constructed deviation brought out due to other psychological issues, suggesting a significant shift in the past decade in terms of lesbian representation. Shonali Bose's *Margarita With a Straw* (2015), Shelly Chopra Dhar's *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha To Aisa Laga* (2019), Harshavardhan Kulkarni's *Badhaai Do* (2022), Anand Tiwari's *Maja Ma* (2022), and Rahul V. Chittela's *Gulmohar* (2023), among others, are some recent attempts at narrativizing and portraying love between women in films. The increase in lesbian representation in films and web series can be attributed to the availability of multiple streaming and Over-The-Top platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc, which have

democratized content. Despite their shortcomings, these portrayals are still significant in bringing the intersectional position of Indian lesbians to the forefront and portraying their diverse experiences to the masses.

Conclusion: Towards a Queer World

As emergent gay and lesbian groups attempt to gain visibility while countering prevailing forms of homophobia within contemporary India, they face an immediate challenge in the allegations that homosexuality is external to Indian culture and society (Puri 172). The precolonial and colonial archive provides several possibilities for 'authenticating' the queer identity and claiming some of the history that modern nationalist homophobia seeks to wipe out (Dasgupta 651). Anti-sex views over non-normative sexualities influenced Indian national identity. Even though scholarship suggested the existence of alternative sexualities in ancient and pre-colonial Indian archives, queer sexuality was positioned to be a Western concept and during the process of nation formation by the British colonial government: "women's emancipation was tied to Victorian notions of proper sexual relationships which, of course, delegitimized everything but the heterosexual, patriarchal, monogamous family unit" (N. Menon 96).

It can be noted that "the articulation of non-normative desire becomes central in the growing canon of South Asian queer fiction" (Bakshi 3) and if we look at the literary culture that has been produced in South Asia in the past decade or two, we see that globalization has put into effect various changes across cultures and societies. Increased access to sexually taboo material has resulted in a "sudden explosion of permissive writing and visual production in the mainstream" (Bose 503), which has further enabled some visibility and production of lesbian as a political, cultural and literary subject. Linda Garber argues that literature is frequently able to fill gaps that are otherwise left by the historical record and "while certain pop-culture fictional accounts are problematic, they are nevertheless excellent at provoking meaningful discussions about representation and historicity" (46).

With multiple intersecting marginalizations based on race, caste, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and location, it is clear that the issues faced by South Asian lesbians are different than those of the larger queer community, and so are their everyday experiences, calling for consistent further inquiry. Sutanuka Bhattacharya argues that "queer persons assigned female gender at birth suffer from double marginalization because of their gender and sexuality unlike their male counterparts" (107). This leaves them vulnerable to diverse oppressive structures and multiple forms of violence, leading to anxiety, emotional isolation, and

development of internalized phobia in the form of self-hatred and self-destructive thoughts. Placing the lived experiences of lesbian women and moments of emotional distress of their everyday lives due to various affective encounters as a site of enquiry will help explore their perspectives and the strategies they use to navigate the heteronormative cultures around them. Emotions like grief, anger, shame, and fear shape cultural productions and public memories. The role of emotions and feelings is acknowledged by Ann Cvetkovich in *An Archive of Feelings* (2003), where she talks about how lesbian sites inspire new ways of thinking about trauma, in particular to a sense of trauma that is tied to the textures of everyday experiences. This makes the act of sharing stories and experiences an important and significant political act to break out of the metaphorical and literal closets these women find themselves in.

In the past few decades, the landscape of LGBTQ+ activism has been dynamic, with various new organizations emerging in support. Some major organizaions working for social and legal acceptance of the queer community include Nazariya, LABIA – A Queer Feminist LBT Collective--and Sappho for Equality. Digital activism and solidarity networks have also had a profound impact on queer activism in the past decade. As of 2023, India witnessed a ground-breaking movement for marriage equality. The Supreme Court of India heard petitions from activists and advocacy groups rallying for the recognition of same-sex unions. The Supreme Court acknowledged the existence of queer persons, even though it refused to legalize unions, leaving Parliament and State Legislators to make the final decision. Regardless of culture or religion, writing about lesbianism and same-sex inclinations has always remained a sensitive issue. South Asian lesbians' space is a paradox in itself—with both the visible and invisible meshed together—which makes the study and analysis of queer women's subjectivities, thoughts, feelings, desires, and experiences separate and all the more urgent and valuable. To create more viable non-heteronormative life possibilities, we need to recognize the necessity to articulate the diverse lived experiences of queer women from the subcontinent. An understanding of how they resist and negotiate with restrictions, both imagined and real, placed on them by society, religion, tradition, culture, and their own psyches, allows us to eventually move from invisibility to visibility towards a more hospitable queer world.

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