

## A DISCORDANT HARMONY – A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE QUEER THEORY FROM AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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**ABSTRACT:** *Queerness or rather queer sexuality in India has always been the favourite child of debate and discussions. Queer identity in India has always suffered through the dilemma of to be or not to be. As Dasgupta puts it, “Identities are complicated to begin with and become more complicated when relating them to nation and sexuality”. Given the diversity of India in terms of not only culture but ethnicity as well, Indian sexual identities are the product of “Mulipicitous effects and perceptions of tradition, modernity, colonization and globalization” (Dasgupta) that are more often in conflict with each other than in a harmonious synthesis. The main argument of this paper is to trace a lineage of queerness in India both in terms of its representation in literature by analyzing *The Editor* (1893) and *The Housewife* (1891) by Rabindranath Tagore; *Lihaaf* (1941) by Ismat Chughtai; and R. Raja Rao’s *The Boyfriend* (2003), and how it prevailed in reality or the societal perception of the same. Providing a literature review by building a bridge in between the ancient and the contemporary India, the paper attempts to trace the missing links of when and how queerness went behind the curtains only to reappear in front of a more complicated, confused and probably a more rigid audience.*

**KEYWORDS:** Queer, LGBT, Gendered-Behavior, Mainstream, Subaltern, Cross-Dressing, Hindu Mythology, Judith Butler, Tagore.

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### INTRODUCTION

Unlike the West, the Hindu society does not have the concept of 'sexual orientation' that classifies gender on the basis of who they desire to be. However, there is a strong, ancient concept of third gender, which is for individuals who have strong elements of both male and female in them. According to Sanskrit texts such as the *Narada-smriti*, *Sushruta Samhita*, etc., this third sex or gender includes people who have conventionally been called homosexuals, bisexuals, transgender people and intersex people (LGBTI). Third genders are described in ancient Vedic texts as males who have a female nature—referring to as homosexual men or feminine-gendered males. The gender/sexual role of third genders has, for long, been predominantly associated with receiving penetration from men, just like the gender/sexual role of manhood has been to penetrate men, women or third genders. However, the *Kama Sutra*, by Vatsyana, clearly describes third-gender men assuming both masculine and feminine identities as well as both receptive and dominant sexual roles.

Over the years, the representation of queerness in Indian literary texts has acquired a space of its own; a “unique” space. By “uniqueness” it is desired to draw the attention towards the peripheral status that has been tagged with queerness; it is something that lies beyond the already drawn, easily understandable, universally acknowledged and intellectually (or morally) approved territory of the society.

It is a widely known fact that gender fluidity and homosexuality has always been there in the Indian subcontinent. Be it mythology, or Kamasutra or several folkloric tales germinated from different regions, India has a long association with queerness. Indian mythology has dealt with the subject as an indispensable part of life cycle where role playing or sex-change is a common, regular and acceptable notion.

The region, which is now known as South Asia, despite its cultural, linguistic, and literary differences, has enough common elements within them to be discussed as single nation. It is quite similar to the shared history of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, which has ample common elements to be discussed as the history of a single nation. Hence, while analyzing the texts the paper will refer to them as Indian only, though they may presently fall in the geographical boundaries of other nations and cultures. This paper further attempt to dispel the myth that alternative sexual alienation is purely a western idea and issues of 'erotic justice' is alien to Indian culture (Kumar, 2014). Analysis of texts, such as, Rabindranath Tagore's *The Editor* (1893) and *Housewife* (1891), *Lihaaf* by Ismat Chughtai (1941), and R.Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend* (2003), form an integral part of this paper. The paper also attempts to trace the lineage between the existence of 'queer'-ness in the Indian subcontinent by referring to not only literary texts, but mythological tales, cultural and religious practices and the societal perception as well. It will attempt to problematize the statement that "*simultaneously marginalized by nation-state & mainstream cultural discourse, the figure of the dissident sexual citizen in India has been, by and large, written out of history and visibility*" (Choudhuri). It also raises the question in the conclusion that had queerness been always there and an integral part of the Indian culture, how come they are mere voiceless creatures in the present times. The paper also highlights some of the fundamental challenges faced by the queer community (as also emphasized upon through Rao's *The Boyfriend*), and how measures are being taken to acknowledge the voices, yet how it can never be enough.

### **Queerness in India**

A critical moment of rupture in Indian queer sexuality occurred with the release of Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* in 1996. In the film Sita, remarks to her lover Radha, '*There is no word in our language to describe what we are or what we feel for each other.*' (Dasgupta)

To present India with a concrete historical background would be a challenging and equally complex task. India has been a melting pot of several diversified cultures that have invaded the country over time and have some strong cultural imprints left on the land. From the earliest Vedic culture up to the colonial era, India has been a witness to a multitude of laws and changing attitudes (Dasgupta). Similarly, it is difficult to state the literature of India as one single literature as it carries several different literatures within its womb. But it is equally interesting to discover the array of examples of homoerotic love and relationships in the vast canvas of Indian literature (starting from the ancient texts to the contemporary texts in diversified regional languages).

As pointed out by Ruth Vanitha, "while same-sex desire was not uniformly valorized or celebrated in pre-colonial India, homosexuality rarely called for punitive measures before the British instituted the Antisodomy Law in 1861 (Kidwai, *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*). What exactly is 'homosexual' or what all leads to 'homophobia' in India is something that is difficult to trace. Forms of male and female homosociality sanctioned by Indian culture make homoeroticism visually and spatially difficult to isolate" (Choudhuri). There exist rituals such as that of *aravani*, which has its roots in pre-colonial India,

and is quite similar to the Vaishnava tradition in Bengal that involves, and approves of, adoration of a male deity by a male devotee (Chaitanya Mahaprabhu). In ancient and medieval India, Krishna and Arjun from the great epic Mahabharata were often referred to as ‘two Krishnas’ (Kidwai, *Same Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature*), indicating a bond of friendship that goes beyond marriage and procreation, and is socially accepted and admired as well. The Mahabharata, the great Indian epic, has several other examples of same-sex attachments that are not only approved of but are admired by the society. Further, in order to avoid contradiction with the established gendered norms, Indian literature also displays examples where a trope is utilized for legitimizing the same-sex relationships. For instance, in Bengali literature, the Krittivas Ramayana, attributes the birth of Bhagirath to the sexual union of two females, through the divine sanction of the god Sankara. Here, the same-sex union is approved of and is legitimized, but only through divine intervention. The ‘divine intervention’ acts as a ‘trope’ that is used to legitimize something which otherwise could not be socially accepted. Another ‘trope’ is the ‘sex-change’ that happens many a times in the Indian mythological tales. The gender-fluidity also brings about the gender-ambiguity, and therefore, a deity might appear in any form – male or female or even a transgender, and also in a non-human form. Further, in the Bhagavata Purana, Vishnu takes the form of the enchantress, Mohini, in order to trick the demons into giving up Amrita, the elixir of life. Shiva later becomes attracted to Mohini and spills his semen on the rocks which turn into gold. Vishnu’s courtship with Siva results in the birth of Ayappa, who is born of the sexual union of two men. But this instance falls in the territory of divinity, and hence, is approved of. Pattanaik who writes that rather than Mohini becoming pregnant, Ayyappa sprang from Shiva's semen, which he ejaculated upon embracing Mohini. In another version, the Pandyan king Rajasekhara of Pantalam adopts the baby. In this version, Ayyappa is referred to as ayoni jata, "not born from a vagina", and later Hariharaputra, "the son of Vishnu and Shiva", and grows up to be a great hero.

Religious-cultural practices, thus, have roots deep within the Indian history, were approved of and tolerated in pre-colonial India, and have survived the defamation brought about by the British. But what is unfortunate today is that these subaltern identities have merely survived and not ‘lived’ or ‘allowed to live’. The transgender community of Hijras in India is one such subaltern identity who have survived everything over the many leaps and bounds of time, yet, today stand at the periphery of the societal territory. Hijras are castrated men who do not have a vagina constructed, and live by the means of prostitution, extortion and other forms of social parasitism (Choudhuri). They reside outside of the mainstream culture, yet are ‘normalized’, i.e., they are present in quite a number; the acknowledgement of their existence is unavoidable, yet their existence and their existential rights go unnoticed and unacknowledged. Their position in the society is counterbalanced with the worship of Bahuchara Mata, one of the many incarnations of Mother Goddess worshipped across India, and thus, their existence is sanctioned, but ‘acceptance’ within the territorial boundaries of the society still remains in question.

### **History of Queer Identity and Hindu Mythology**

Alan Danielou says that “The hermaphrodite, the homosexuals and the transvestites have a symbolic value and are considered privileged beings, images of the Ardhanarishvara” (Danielou). Not only gender, but also sexuality has certain hegemonic normative connotations set out within society. This notion of hegemonic sexuality as well as the way in which the body incorporates and expresses hegemonic gender and sexuality is presented by gender theorist

Judith Butler (Butler, *Bodies that Matter*). *Nachtraglichkeit* describes the ways in which an infantile experience that is either incomprehensible or traumatic is nonetheless somehow retained by memory unconsciously and reactivated at a later time in a different context. The notion comes from an early stage in Freud's speculations and was used to explain the mechanism of hysteria, in which a traumatic early experience is reactivated in terms of a less traumatic later provocation. Signification involves the constant reactivation of significant material in new and unpredictable contexts, which thus produces new significance and new meanings. In Sophocles' drama the unfolding of the tragedy involves Oedipus' gradual discovery of his own guilt. This in Freud's explanation is: "the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father" (Strachey)). Freud argues that the power of this artwork lies in the ability of the poet to force us into a transferred recognition of what he calls "our own inner minds." Those same impulses (to patricide and incest with the mother) are still lurking yet "suppressed" within all of us. Oedipus' unconscious guilt stands figuratively for our own unconscious guilt. "Like Oedipus, we live in ignorance of these wishes, repugnant to morality, which have been forced upon us by Nature, and after their revelation we may all of us well seek to close our eyes to the scene of our childhood" (Strachey)). Lacan's version of the triangulated Oedipus complex (mother—child—father) combines Freud's theory with structural linguistics, developed as we have seen particularly from the theories of Saussure, Levi-Strauss and Jakobson. Symbolization thus acts as an introduction to the world that is at the same time an introduction to the concept of "lack". The introduction of a meaningful element disrupts the perfect unity of the imaginary relation, which only has the sense of a perfect unity by virtue of the meaningful element that excludes perfection. The experience of lack is therefore intrinsic to human existence. This "lack" manifests itself not only as "penis envy" in females but in the males, a subconscious desire to adopt the elaborate body of the female and its physicality. This new queer identity potentially subverts stable distinctions between identification and desire and also by extension, the secure and heavily defended polarities of masculine and feminine subjectivity.

The desire to transcend the gender typification imposed by society has always been present throughout the ages. Goldman writes of transsexualism in Hindu literature: "Few cultures have accorded this phenomenon so prominent a place in the realms of mythology and religion as has that of traditional India." Queer manifestations of sexuality, though repressed socially, squeeze their way into the myths, legends and lore of the land. Many deities in Hinduism and Indian mythology are represented as both male and female at different times and in different incarnations or may manifest with characteristics of both genders at once such as the Ardhanarishvara (The Lord whose half is a woman) created by the merging of the god Shiva and his consort Parvati or the hermaphroditic Laxmi-Narayan. This form of Shiva represents "the totality that lies beyond duality" and is associated with communication between men and women or between beauty and physical prowess. Changes of sex and cross-dressing also occur in myths about non-divine figures. One such figure is Shikhandi, a character in the Mahabharat. During the Kurukshetra war, Bhishma recognised him as Amba reborn and refused to fight "a woman". Accordingly, Arjuna hid behind Shikhandi in order to defeat the almost invincible Bhishma. In the Javanese telling, Shikhandi never becomes a man but is a woman equal to a man and is the wife of Arjun. Arjun himself is an example of gender variance. When he refused her amorous advances, the nymph Urvashi cursed him that he would become a "kliba", a member of the third gender. Arjun took the name Brihannala and dressed in women's clothes and taught the arts of music, singing and dancing to the princess Uttara and her female attendees of the city ruled by king Virata. The birth of Ayappa in Hindu mythology, refers to the

“completeness” of an androgynous identity that has always been looked upon as one of symbolic perfection from classical antiquity.

According to Tamil versions of the Mahabharata, the god Krishna – an incarnation of Vishnu – also took the form of Mohini and married Aravan. This was in order to give Aravan the chance to experience love before his death, as he had volunteered to be sacrificed. Krishna remained in mourning in the Mohini form for some time after Aravan's death. This marriage and death of Aravan are commemorated annually in a rite known as Thali, during which Hijra (Indian "third gender") take on the role of Krishna-Mohini and "marry" Aravan in a mass-wedding, followed by an 18-day festival. The festival ends with a ritual burial of Aravan, while the Hirjas mourn in Tamil style: by beating their chests in ritual dances, breaking their bangles and changing into white mourning clothes

The story of Ila, a king cursed by Shiva and Parvati to be a man one month and a woman the next, appears in several traditional Hindu texts. After changing sex, Ila loses the memory of being the other gender. During one such period, Ila marries Budha (the god of the planet Mercury). Although Budha knows of Ila's alternating gender, he doesn't enlighten the 'male' Ila, who remains unaware of his life as a woman. The two live together as man and wife only when Ila is female. In the Ramayana version, Ila bears Budha a son, although in the Mahabharata Ila is called both mother and father of the child. After this birth the curse is lifted and Ila is totally changed into a man who goes on to father several children with his wife. Numerous deities have been considered patrons of third-sex or homoerotically-inclined people. This patronage can originate in mythological stories about the deity, or from religious practices and rituals. For example, Conner and Sparks argue that the goddess of fire, love and sexuality, Arani, has been linked to lesbian eroticism via rituals in her honor: for example two pieces of wood perceived as feminine, called the adhararani and utararani, are rubbed together, simulating a spiritual lesbian interaction.

Bahuchara Mata is a patron goddess of the Hirja. In popular iconography she is often shown riding a rooster and carrying a sword, trident and a book. Various stories link Bahuchara to castration or other changes in physical sexual characteristics, sometimes as the result of her aiming curses against men. Bahuchara is believed to have originated as a mortal woman who became martyred. In one story, Bahuchara is attacked by a bandit who attempts to rape her, but she takes his sword, cuts off her breasts and dies. In another story, Bahuchara curses her husband when she catches him sneaking to the woods to engage in homoerotic behavior, causing his genitals to fall off and forcing him to dress as a woman.

Stories also link Bahuchara to gender variance after she becomes divine. One myth concerns a king who prayed to Bahuchara for a son. Bahuchara complied, but the prince grew up to be impotent. One night Bahuchara appeared to the prince in a dream and ordered him to cut off his genitals, wear women's clothes and become her servant. Bahuchara is believed to continue to identify impotent men and command them to do the same. If they refuse, she punishes them: for their next seven incarnations they will be impotent. This myth is the origin of the cult of Bahuchara Mata, whose devotees are required to self-castrate and remain celibate.

Samba, the son of Krishna, is also a patron of eunuchs, transgender people and homoeroticism. Samba dresses in women's clothes to mock and trick people, and so that he can more easily enter the company of women and seduce them. In the Mausala Purana, Samba, dressed as woman, is cursed after being questioned about "her" supposed pregnancy. As a result of the curse, Samba, although remaining male, gives birth to an iron pestle and mortar.

Medieval Hindu temples such as those at Khajuraho depict sexual acts in sculptures on the external walls. Some of these scenes involve same-sex sexuality, for instance, a woman caressing another woman engaged in intercourse with women, man receiving fellatio from another man etc. have been depicted therein. Further, the Rajarani Temple in Bhuvaneshwar, Odisha, depicts a sculpture of two women engaged in oral sex. Examples such as these are scattered everywhere in the Indian subcontinent, evidently pointing towards the existence of same-sex relationships since the ancient eras itself.

### **Queer Identity and its Impact on Literature**

Queer identity in the sphere of Ancient Indian Literature incorporates Hindu philosophy that bears the concept of a third sex or third gender (*tritiya-prakriti* – literally, "third nature"). This category includes a wide range of people with mixed male and female natures such as effeminate males, masculine females, transgender people, transsexual people, the intersexed, androgynes, and so on. However, the original nature of third-gender has nothing to do with sexual orientation as is reported by the sects of modern LGBT and contemporary west. Third-genders have no connection with sex among men (which is universal). Third-genders are of a different gender from males and females because they have a female inside regardless of who they are sexually attracted to. Participation in religious ceremonies, especially as cross-dressing dancers and devotees of certain temple gods/goddesses, is considered auspicious in traditional Hinduism. Some Hindus believe that third-sex people have special powers allowing them to bless or curse others. In the Hindu narrative tradition, stories of gods and mortals changing gender occur. Sometimes they also engage in heterosexual activities as different reincarnated genders. Homosexual and transgender Hindus commonly identify with and worship the various Hindu deities connected with gender diversity such as Ardhanarisvara (the androgynous form of Shiva and his consort Parvati), Aravan (a hero whom the god Krishna married after becoming a woman), Harihara (an incarnation of Shiva and Vishnu combined), Bahuchara Mata (a goddess connected with transsexuality and eunuchism), Gadadhara (an incarnation of Radha in male form), Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (an incarnation of Radha and Krishna combined), Chandi-Chamunda (twin warrior goddesses), Bhagavati-devi (a Hindu goddess associated with crossdressing), Gangamma (a goddess connected with cross-dressing and disguises) and the goddess Yellamma. There are also specific festivals connected to the worship of these deities, some of which are famous in India for their crossdressing devotees. These festivals include the Aravan Festival of Koovagam, the Bahuchara Mata Festivals of Gujarat and the Yellamma Festivals of Karnataka, among others. Deities displaying gender variance include Mohini, the female avatar of the god Vishnu and Vaikuntha Kamalaja, the androgynous form of Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi.

LGBT interpretations are also drawn in the legends of birth of the deities Ayyappa (a god born from the union of Shiva and Mohini), Bhagiratha (an Indian king born of two female parents) and Kartikeya (where the fire-god Agni "swallows" the seed of Shiva after disturbing his coitus with his consort Parvati). Some homosexual Hindus also worship the gods Mitra and Varuna, who are associated with two lunar phases and same-sex relations in ancient Brahmana texts.

Gender variance is also observed in heroes in Hindu scriptures. The Hindu epic Mahabharata narrates that the hero Arjuna takes a vow to live as a member of the third sex for a year as the result of a curse he is compelled to honor. Ila, a king from Hindu narratives, is also known for his/her gender changes.

Some versions of the Krittivasa Ramayana, the most popular Bengali text on the pastimes of Ramachandra (an incarnation of Vishnu), relate a story of two queens who conceived a child together. When the king of the Sun Dynasty, Maharaja Dilipa, died, the demigods become concerned that he did not have a son to continue his line. Shiva therefore appeared before the king's two widowed queens and commanded them, "You two make love together and by my blessings you will bear a beautiful son." The two wives, with great affection for each other, executed Shiva's order until one of them conceived a child. The sage Astavakra accordingly named the child "Bhagiratha" – he who was born from two vulvas. Bhagiratha later became a king and is credited with bringing the river Ganges down to earth through his austerities.

Hindus have many sacred texts and different communities give special importance to different texts. Even more so than in other religions, Hindus also foster disparate interpretations of the meaning of various texts. The Vedas, which form the foundation of Hinduism for many, do not refer explicitly to homosexuality, but Rigveda says regarding Samsara that Vikruti Evam Prakriti (perversity/diversity is what nature is all about, or, what seems un-natural is also natural), which some scholars believe recognizes the cyclical constancy of homosexual/transsexual dimensions of human life, like all forms of universal diversities. People of a third gender (tritiya-prakriti), not fully men nor women, are mentioned here and there throughout Hindu texts such as the Puranas but are not specifically defined. In general they are portrayed as effeminate men, often cowardly, and with no desire for women. Modern readers often draw parallels between these and modern stereotypes of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender sexual identities.

Historians Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, in their pioneering book, *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, for the first time compiled extracts from Indian texts, from ancient to modern times, including many Hindu texts, translated from 15 Indian languages. In their accompanying analytical essays, they also demonstrated that Hindu texts have discussed and debated same-sex desire from the earliest times, in tones ranging from critical to non-judgmental to playful and celebratory.

Historian Devdutt Pattanaik summarizes the place of homosexuality in Hindu literature as follows: "though not part of the mainstream, its existence was acknowledged but not approved." Other Indologists assert that homosexuality was not approved for brahmanas or the twice-born but accepted among other castes.

In his book, *Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex*, Vaishnava monk Amara Das Wilhelm demonstrates how ancient expressions of Hinduism accommodated homosexual and transgender persons much more positively than we see in India today: "Early Vedic teachings stressed responsible family life and asceticism but also tolerated different types of sexualities within general society."

Other significant texts include: The Mahanirvana Tantra that exclude the third-gendered from the right of inheritance, although establishing they have the right to be financially supported by their family. The Kama Sutra is an ancient text dealing with kama or desire (of all kinds), which in Hindu thought is one of the four normative and spiritual goals of life. The Kama Sutra is the earliest extant and most important work in the Kama Shastra tradition of Sanskrit literature. It was compiled by the philosopher Vatsyayana around the 4th century, from earlier texts, and describes homosexual practices in several places, as well as a range of sex/gender 'types'. The author acknowledges that these relations also involve love and a bond of trust.

The author describes techniques by which masculine and feminine types of the third sex (*tritiya-prakriti*), as well as women, perform fellatio. The Second Part, Ninth Chapter of *Kama Sutra* specifically describes two kinds of men that we would recognize today as masculine- and feminine-type homosexuals but which are mentioned in older, Victorian British translations as simply "eunuchs." The chapter describes their appearances – feminine types dressed up as women whereas masculine types maintained muscular physiques and grew small beards, moustaches, etc. – and their various professions as masseurs, barbers and prostitutes are all described. Such homosexual men were also known to marry, according to the *Kama Sutra*: "There are also third-sex citizens, sometimes greatly attached to one another and with complete faith in one another, who get married together." (Vatsyayana, *Kama Sutra*, 2.9.36). In the *Jayamangala* of Yashodhara, an important twelfth-century commentary on the *Kama Sutra*, it is also stated: "Citizens with this kind of homosexual inclination, who renounce women and can do without them willingly because they love one another, get married together, bound by a deep and trusting friendship." After describing fellatio as performed between men of the third sex, the *Sutra* then mentions the practice as an act between men and women, wherein the homosexuals acts are scorned, especially for brahmanas. (Vatsyayana, *Kama Sutra*, 2.9.37)

The *Kama Sutra* also refers to *svairini*, who are "independent women who frequent their own kind or others" (Vatsyayana, *Kama Sutra*, 2.8.26) — or, in another passage: "the liberated woman, or *svairini*, is one who refuses a husband and has relations in her own home or in other houses" (6.6.50). In a famous commentary on the *Kama Sutra* from the 12th century, *Jayamangala*, explains: "A woman known for her independence, with no sexual bars, and acting as she wishes, is called *svairini*. She makes love with her own kind. She strokes her partner at the point of union, which she kisses" (Vatsyayana, *Films for Liberation*). The various practices of lesbians are described in detail within the Second Part, Eighth Chapter of the *Kama Sutra*.

There are other ancient Hindu/Sanskrit texts that refer to homosexuality. The *Sushruta Samhita*, for example, a highly respected Hindu medical text dating back to at least 600 B.C., mentions two different types of homosexual men (*kumbhika* – men who take the passive role in anal sex; and *asekya* – men who devour the semen of other men) as well as transgender people (*sandha* – men with the qualities, behavior and speech of women). It also states that men who behave like women, or women who behave like men, are determined as such at the time of their conception in the womb. The *Sushruta Samhita* also mentions the possibility of two women uniting and becoming pregnant as a result of the mingling of their sexual fluids. It states that the child born of such a union will be "boneless." Such a birth is indeed described in the *Krittivasa Ramayana* of Bengal.

Other texts list the various types of men who are impotent with women (known in Sanskrit as *sandha*, *kliba*, *napumsaka*, and *panda*). The *Sabda-kalpa-druma* Sanskrit-Sanskrit dictionary, for instance, lists twenty types, as does the *Kamatantra* and *Smriti-Ratnavali* of Vacaspati (14th century). The *Narada Smriti* similarly lists fourteen different types. Included among the lists are transgender people (*sandha*), intersex people (*nisarga*), and three different types of homosexual men (*mukhebhaga*, *kumbhika* and *asekya*). Such texts demonstrate that third-sex terms like *sandha* and *napumsaka* actually refer to many different types of "men who are impotent with women," and that simplistic definitions such as "eunuch" or "neuter" may not always be accurate and in some cases totally incorrect. In his article *Homosexuality and Hinduism*, Arvind Sharma expresses his doubt over the common English translation of words like *kliba* into "eunuch" as follows: "The limited practice of castration in India raises another

point significant for the rest of the discussion, namely, whether rendering a word such as "kliba" as "eunuch" regularly is correct..." (A. Sharma).

The Arthashastra of Kautilya represents the principle text of secular law and illustrates the attitude of the judiciary towards sexual matters. Heterosexual vaginal sex is proposed as the norm by this text and legal issues arising from deviation there from are punishable by fines and in extreme cases by capital punishment. Homosexual acts are cited as a small offence punishable by a fine.

Sangam literature use the word 'Pedi' to refer to transwomen. Likewise, the famous Sangam period characters of King Koperunchozhan and Pisuranthaiyar are another example for same sex love and They are said to have not seen each other at all and yet shared love and regard for each other, so much, that they die at the same time at different places. For instance, the friendship between King Pari and poet Kabilar is shown as something more than just friendship. There are lyrical undertones suggestive of the intimate relationship they had. But since there are no explicit representation, one can only postulate a possibility.

In the modern times, the homoerotic and so called 'queer' relationships passes through many lanes and by-lanes of ancient Indian literature, which still have impact on several of the present day festivals and rituals. The paper now arrives at a juncture where it will take up some of the significant texts of modern Indian literature (20th century and onwards) that I believe have an eternal essence of the 'queer' space in the context of present times.

The texts chosen in this section include two short stories by Tagore, Lihaaf by Chughtai, and Raja Rao's The Boyfriend. There exists numerous other texts to be discussed in the context, yet the choice of this particular set is diverse in its nature, and present vivid scenarios for the 'queer' spaces in the post-colonial India.

Rabindranath Tagore, held an iconic status in the late 19th century and 20th century and contributed significantly in shaping the literature of Bengal and India. His renown was not confined to his literary wonders only; the ideologies presented his commentaries and essays on Indian philosophy, nationalism, nature and the Indian social structure in general, widely shaped the 20th century India. One of his greatest achievements was perhaps the establishment of Vishwa Bharati University in Shantiniketan, West Bengal. He envisioned a university as a place of learning and not just a mere place of academic knowledge transfer. He envisioned such a place of learning where the geographical barriers cease to exist, where the world, the Vishwa, meets Bharat, India; and gets dissolved in a barrier free world of knowledge, learning and innovations. Yet, shattering all that Tagore envisioned about Vishwa Bharati, it is said that the university became known more for encouraging and nurturing effeminacy in its students. But it is difficult to be certain about the origin of this sentiment (Choudhuri). It could probably be its pastoral settings or its explicit encouragement of performing arts over professional disciplines that contributed towards such a sentiment about the university. For instance, filmmaker Satyajit Ray – one of the university's alumni, actually had expressed serious apprehensions about enrolling there because of this disrepute (Choudhuri). This paper, in the context, discusses how Tagore's perception of queerness was related to and also a critique of non-conformed masculinity. The paper discusses two of his other short stories, The Editor (Sampadak, 1893), and Housewife (Ginni, 1891) in the context, and also establishes the fact that Tagore presented his critique of "the way masculinity was constituted and perceived in colonial and nationalistic discourse in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century" (Choudhuri) in these stories, as also gets reflected in several of his other works such as The

Divide (Byabodhan, 1891). Tagore, in a way, attempts in dismantling the universally perceived notions of gendered behavior.

One of the stories to be discussed in the context is *Sompadok* (The Editor), a story about a man who is compelled to enter the feminine sphere of domesticity when his wife dies leaving behind their only daughter. With the urgent need to find a means of livelihood, Tagore emphasizes on the masculinity of the profession that the protagonist chooses. Writing satirical farces with all aggression is surely a masculine activity. Being the *Sampadak* immediately gave him the relief from the domestic duties that he was compelled to involve in, and also made him socially visible apart from the obvious tag of being the ‘man’ doing the obvious duty of earning the bread and the butter instead of preparing it. The equation of writing as a job with machismo paved the way for him to attempt in elevating his sagging self-esteem by “identifying himself with an icon of hypermasculinity”. The editor’s fame meets with an abrupt end when the zamindar of the neighboring village sets up a rival publication, berating the fine rhetorical exercise in blunt, down-to-earth prose, consequently inviting humiliating sallies from friend (Choudhuri). The protagonist’s urge to disengage himself from the private sphere and his pleasure of being associated with the outer sphere, is what becomes noteworthy in the context. It is the principal of role reversal that his relationship with his daughter works upon. Instead of the father embracing ‘fatherhood’, it is the daughter who embodies the maternal role in time. It is interesting to note that a man’s exercise of his manhood comes into existence by oppressing two of the most historically oppressed classes: women and the economically deprived. In order to establish his manhood, he conveniently withdraws the nurture that he should have been providing to his motherless child, further establishing the notion that such a task is gendered in the society’s perception (i.e., feminine) (Choudhuri).

The story starts with a clear demarcation of the public and private spaces, and more importantly, they clearly emerge as gendered spaces: the outer sphere or the world, referring exclusively to the masculine sphere of economic activity, social visibility and political agency; posited against the inner sphere or the home, referring exclusively to the feminine sphere of caregiving and nurturing: When my wife was alive I didn’t give much thought to Prabha. I was more involved with her mother than with her...I would, whenever I was in the mood, romp around with her; but the moment she started to cry I would return her to her mother’s arms and make a speedy escape. I never considered what care and effort was needed to bring up a child” (Tagore).

But with time, it is well established that the domestic sphere is something that could not be completely overlooked. There is gender fluidity, the ambiguousness, which emerges by the end of the story. It is this transitional fluidity of gender that the ‘queer’ space lies in. The father comes back to the domesticity as he loses his hold over the professional sphere. As Choudhuri puts it “the resumption of domestic/filial duties left behind by the dead wife— gestures towards a moment that embodies a possibility of moving between gender-segregated spaces. It is this mobility that is understood as redemptive” (Choudhuri). The masculine has to take a rebound towards the feminine domestic sphere and it is within this transitional sphere that the ‘queerness’ - the anomalous - resides.

Tagore’s critique of socially perceived masculinity gets reflected in yet another of his short stories - *Housewife* (Ginni). The tension between the public and private spaces are once again established with a critique of culture that has branded itself as ‘pure masculinity’; it refuses and becomes violently intolerant towards anything that goes beyond the established gendered behavior that strayed beyond these specified, inflexible limits (Choudhuri).

The story is about Ashu – a shy, reticent, young schoolboy, who is victimized by his austere schoolteacher Shibanath as effeminate, passive and androgynous to the world (here, it is the entire class). Ashu’s only fault is that he is caught playing house-house with his younger sister, and thus, he is brandished as guilty of sexual transgression. Moreover, the victimization is done by none other than his teacher Shibanath, who stands for the hypermasculinity, the aggressive machoism. “The “clean-shaven” Shibanath has “close-cropped”, hair but flaunts his “short pigtail” (tiki)— his mark of Brahmanism— with pride” (Choudhuri). He is the epitome of the quintessential uber male setup valorized by the society, who find immense pleasure in verbally assaulting his pupils, often giving them humiliating name. In Ashu’s case, it was Ginni or Housewife that was bestowed upon him by Shibanath, exposing him to a crueler environment of insults and marred reputation of manhood. There is a demarcation of spaces that can be observed in the story – the private space of Indian household is deemed as purely feminine that stands in complete contrast to “the public space of rational masculinity” (Choudhuri, 2009); and also, inferior to the latter to a great extent. But the other students in the story seems equally victimized and aware of Shibanath’s cruelty; an attack on one’s name is like attacking the very personality of the person; and Shibanath does exactly the same; “the students are painfully aware of Shibanath’s violent erasure of their personalities” (Choudhuri). It is interesting to note that Shibanath dubs Ashu as Ginni which is a colloquial term for the word grihini, which means the mistress of the household, but actually refers to that particular part of the Griha or the house that is feminine. In other words, the feminine represents the household itself – with her own identity being suppressed within the domestic duties. Whereas, in contrast, the male counterpart of the same is grihakarta, literally translating to as the Master of the House, including the feminized part and the females within that boundary. “Shibanath’s choice of the appellation ginni not only underscores Ashu’s supposed effeminacy, but also gestures at the misogynistic ordering of gender hierarchy” (Choudhuri). The story is seen by many (including Choudhuri) as a response by Tagore to his liberal yet rigid upbringing in the Thakurbari. As unorthodox as Tagore’s about gendered behavior, it was surprising to witness the emphasis on the ‘masculine’ dimension of education of the male adolescents of the prestigious Thakurbari. Consequently, young Robi (Tagore) was well versed with the sport of wrestling - considered essentially a masculine sport, could swim the Padma (river) on the Tagore estates and walk 25 miles in the hills at a stretch – all signs that could be read as the showcasing of masculine aggression. In the story, Ashu, as stated by the narrator (his classmate), could be never seen playing with other boys. He was always this boy with a demurred personality who could only “sit with his legs and the end of his dhoti dangling down from the bench, while all the boys stared at him” (Tagore) as Shibanath, the avatar of Yama himself, hurled nonsensical ridicule in all his masculine aggression. This sudden exposure of his private self completely alienates Ashu from his peers and instantly marks him as the ‘other’ pushing him towards the periphery, as his peers, who share the same fate, also joins the chanting of ‘Housewife! Housewife!’ In the story, it is not only Ashu’s guilt that his fate cruelly plays upon, but he is instantly brandished as the ‘queer’ – the odd one out, who cannot stand up to the culturally marked and universally acknowledged ideal of hypermasculinity. It is quite similar to the victimization of the androgynous males, who find no voice in this socially structured “‘pure’ model of masculinity purged of the every trace of the feminine” (Choudhuri).

Another author without whom this discussion remains incomplete is Ismat Chughtai. Published in 1942, Chughtai’s most celebrated story, Lihaaf, presented the queer love like no other and also, garnered controversy like no other. Published in an Urdu literary journal Adab-i-Latif, Lihaaf was leveled with the charges of obscenity and Chughtai was summoned by Lahore court in 1944. Accused of blasphemy and promoting immorality, Chughtai chose to contest the charge

instead of apologizing for his literary creation, and even went on to win the case. Lihaaf is the story of same-sex, i.e., lesbian relationship, between two women, narrated by a pubescent girl. It is said that the story is inspired by one of her own childhood encounters where she could see what was happening but was unable to grasp the meaning of it; the same has been presented by the narrator of the story, who sees what goes on within the lihaaf (the quilt) but is yet to fully grasp the meaning of why, how and what exactly it means. The story revolves around Begum Jaan, the aristocratic friend of the narrator's mother and her relationship with her maid and masseuse Rabbo. Neglected by her husband, who takes special fondness in pursuing young boys, and confined to the female quarters, i.e., zenana, of the household, the only confidant that Begum Jaan finds herself with is Rabbo. It is not only her expression that is restricted, but her sexuality as well; it is more like her existence is confined within the four walls of zenana altogether. Stripped off of any means of expression, Begum Jaan actually discovers and further explores her liberation (especially sexual), within the four walls. The blossoming and wanders of the relationship is witnessed by the narrator, who is dumped in the household by her mother. It is interesting to note the gender roles, and the transitional fluidity that runs within the rigid gendered behavior. The narrator is put up to this household as a punishment by her mother for fighting with her brothers. She is dumped in the zenana so that she learns more of the 'feminine' behavior and will possibly learn to curb and eventually cure her tomboyishness. But instead of learning the know-how of the incarcerations and restrictions that are supposedly should be willingly embraced by a woman, she discovers the 'blasphemous' relationship between Begum Jaan and Rabbo. The relationship is witnessed, but not entirely understood, by the narrator; but the partially comprehended images of intimacy keep returning to haunt her (Choudhuri). It is further interesting to note that the zenana is represented as the feminine corner of the household which is pure and is traditionally constructed to maintain the sexual piousness and purity of the women – both married and unmarried. Here, it is a space in the marital home, which assures that no physical contact is being made with the Begum of the house, with the exception for the Nawab (the only male with access), who never bothers to visit the sphere. The sphere, though stands for everything that is feminine, including fertility, remains sterile. Instead, it transforms as a stage where Begum Jaan acts out her sexual frustrations. The zenana becomes an outlet for the baffling expression of femininity and feminine desires, and in the present context, can be deemed as the queer space. Another queer space is the lihaaf itself, which is the central symbol in the story; it is the queer space-within-a-queer space (the zenana)-in-a-space (the household as a whole). Both the zenana and the lihaaf become spaces that contain and conceals at the same time, the queer desire. The quilt is an ambivalent object that conventionally associates itself with the feeling of comfort and protection. The quilt surely becomes a space of comfort for Begum Jaan as it is within this territory that all her sexual frustrations find their voice. It also becomes a tool of protection in a way by visually obstructing the happenings within it, which could have been inappropriate for a young girl (the narrator), especially since she witnesses their heaving quilt with growing terror and fascination the narrator witnesses their heaving quilt with growing terror and fascination: "When I fell asleep Rabbo was scratching her back...At night I awoke with a start. It was pitch dark. Begum Jaan's quilt was shaking vigorously, as if an elephant was struggling beneath it" (Chughtai) (Choudhuri). There are no direct visuals of the physical intimacy that goes on between the two women, except for the scratching of the back and the constant massage that Rabbo gives to Begum Jaan. Such instances of physical intimacy also demonstrates the need of healing that Begum Jaan's stale and stagnant marriage needs, and Rabbo, acts as nothing but a healer to this, on a metaphorical level. The massage becomes elixir, similar to the sexual acts which act as elixir to our mental and physical needs. After discussing everything about the text, it still remains kind of difficult to mark it as an example of a queer text, since "the very nature and dynamics of desire remain

ambiguous and almost literally veiled” (Choudhuri). The queerness, as presented in the story, can also be read as ‘situational lesbianism’ where Begum Jaan is compelled to fulfill her unmet sexual needs with the immediate picks available to her. This further problematizes the issue and also sheds light to the fact that it is more about the female body and its desires/needs that has historically been oppressed and exploited, thus, also taking a feminine turn in the discussion. Essentially with Lihaaf, Chugtai remains Urdu literature’s one of the most courageous and controversial writer and its most resolute iconoclast (Jena). Just as Tagore’s *The Editor* commences with a clear demarcation of the public and private life, it is this demarcation that gets dissolved in Lihaaf. Chugati encounters the truth of woman’s body, her realization and consciousness and the under currents of the sexual desire, without labelling it anything (Jena). It was the truth – the simple naked truth – devoid of any queerness or any other label, but was strong enough to stir a tempest into the socially constructed civilized world of gendered behavior.

Queer space, takes yet another depiction in R. Raja Rao’s *The Boyfriend*. Published in 2003, the novel presents the queer world of 1990s India, where the protagonist, Yudi, a freelance journalist, and more importantly, a gay franeur, seeks a space of his own. Living in Mumbai, Yudi “leads a bachelor life with his routine involving travelling in local trains and visits to public toilets and picking up boys, especially those belonging to working class to have casual sex” (Dua). Milind, a nineteen year old (or probably in his early twenties) Dalit boy, is the discovery of Yudi one of many such encounters at a Churchgate loo. Fearing him to be a hustler, Yudi hurriedly set him off after the act. Yet, his actual emotions for Milind is realized by Yudi only when the city is exposed to ugly communal riots of Babri Masjid and Yudi is fearful for the life of Milind. They meet again and separate again throughout the story, and their union never attains the same fate as any other straight couple’s does in the urban backdrop of Mumbai. The urban landscape of Mumbai, the city of dreams, too, restricts the subaltern to dream of a free existence. Yuid, an urban gay, therefore weaves in and out of the Mumbai gay underbelly from time to time. The city cannot offer any option to its dissident sexual citizens and the subaltern queer spaces merges with other marginalized spheres of the city. Rao’s choice of a gay protagonist is interesting as it challenges the very ‘visible’ spaces of the society. The depiction of local trains, Yudi’s profession et al are all coexisting with the ‘visible’ spaces of the society, yet is marginalized. They are everywhere, just like the other queer entities such as eunuchs, yet deemed invisible in the vast geography of visible straights and gendered behavior. In the novel, the protagonist goes on to hunt the urban city everyday seeking his sexual gratification and the process becomes repetitive till he gets emotionally involved with one of his ‘picks’. But the boundaries of civilization appears more specifically than ever and it is interesting to note that the courtship of Yudi and Milind takes place only in confined places of restricted queer walls – Café Volga, “amidst the psychedelic lights of the gay nightclub Testosterone, their brief time as a couple is portrayed within the confines of Yudi’s bachelor apartment (affectionately and flippantly dubbed Mate House)” (Choudhuri). Though Yudi, being the upper class (when compared with the social status of Milind), has the liberty to take picks of his choice, Milind’s situation is further complex for his social status of being a Dalit. Belonging from a marginalized class, Milind is stripped off of any kind of expression perhaps since his existence; he is probably never taught of the concept of ‘free expression’. That is perhaps, towards the end of the story Milind is married off to a girl of his parent’s choice, and Yudi is back to his cruising flaner life. In a way, Rao’s Mumbai acts as a closet that hides its male queer population “locked in a schizophrenia that alternates between unwilling performances of heterosexuality and furtive pursuits of same-sex love” (Choudhuri).

## Queerness Today

With the dawn of the 21st century, India has been so much influenced by the “western” British culture, that it adopted the 19th century British ideologies as its own. Gradually, India entered a phase of individual identity as a nation where ideas of secularism or empowerment were penetrating deep into the minds of the masses. Liberty was also yet another facet of this – liberty from foreign rule that has already been achieved; now what remained was to achieve liberty from the evil residing within. The caste system, poverty, unemployment, shifting gender roles etc. became pivotal in this context. The Constitution of India was in the making and India was getting ready for its much awaited and desired status of Swaraj. But nowhere amidst all of this queerness found even an inch of space for itself. It is as if it never really existed.

The land of Kama sutra suddenly had an awakening and realized that something considered carnal never actually existed in its history. “Some of the most private of the ‘private troubles’ in my understanding are possibly the sexual and erotic aspects of human life which are missing from sociological concerns in India and South Asia” (Kumar). Even though characters such as Shikhandi, and Chitrangada – The Warrior Princess, forms an integral part of ancient Indian literature, yet people choose to remain completely ambiguous about the queer identity. They never are willing to acknowledge the possibility of the presence of multiple sexes within an individual; this is a country which denies the fundamental rights to a section as brutally as they crush their rights to existence. Desire has always been socially organized and regulated. Desires should only be addressed when one has to take forward the family line. These are some of the facts that have been spoon-fed since childhood to all of us. Free expression of desire means ‘violation’ to both men and women, though, in definitely different contexts. Suppression of desires of the weaker sex has always found expression in literature with an array of writers taking up the issue. Tagore’s Binodini is a sheer example of explicit boldness in her expression of ‘longing for a man’s touch’. And what more can be expected from the mankind when the gender war is still on. Further, to complicate the scenario, there emerged a section who came from the ‘no-man’s land’. And the mankind in such a diversified country decided to deny their very existence as if they were never there. The entire gender dichotomy can be summarized in a single question, “is compulsory heterosexuality only about controlling desire or is it about dictating that the world can have only two kinds of people—women and men?” (Kumar). Despite being such an awareness about the ‘gender’ topic being so significant, the usual discussions of gender issues confine to stretch beyond a certain point. It all boils down to the men-women dichotomy and never addresses ‘gender’ as the umbrella term covering every gender under its shade. The presence of gender identities beyond the usual man-woman gamut seems invisible to the audience and they remain at the backstage – voiceless, expressionless. They are the lives lived outside the definable and bound imagination of our society (M. Sharma). Cossman aptly points out Eve Kosofsky Sedwick’s statement (Sedwick) in her Epistemology of Closet, where she wrote that it was axiomatic that ‘the study of sexuality is not co-extensive with the study of gender’ and consequently, voicing Sedwick’s statement yet again, “anti-homophobic inquiry is not co-extensive with feminist theory” (Cossman). In 2008, the state of Tamil Nadu recognized the "Third Gender"; with its civil supplies department giving in the ration card a provision for a new sex column as 'T', distinct from the usual 'M' and 'F' for males and females respectively. This was the first time that authorities in India have officially recognized the third gender. Chennai 2009 serves as a milestone in the history of queer activism in India. The Delhi High Court decriminalized homosexuality, and thus, overturned the criminal law that defined same-sex relationships and activity as ‘unnatural offence’. In doing so, an aspect of the infamous Section 377 of Indian Penal Code (IPC) was

nullified on the grounds that the criminalization of consensual sexual acts in private infringed the fundamental rights guaranteed to the individual under the Constitution of India (Choudhuri). Consensus is the key in the judgment; non-consensus sexual acts continue to be a criminal offence in the eyes of the law. The decision was the outcome of an initiative taken by Naz Foundation, a non-governmental organization (NGO) working in the interest of the people and human rights. A few days prior to this, LGBT activists and supporters organized a Pride Parade in Chennai on June 29, 2009. A large number of LGBT people and supporters swarm the city wearing masks; 'masks' were a defining element of the parade. This is because the masks were protecting the true identity of the 'queer' yet, allowed them to be one of the many in the 'visible spaces' of the society. It is interesting to note that the masks were primarily of pink color with feather dusters – traditionally associated with femininity; and the usage of these "indicated a subversion of received notions of gendered and sexual practices, a key philosophy in queer activism" (Choudhuri). However, despite this added signification, the masks continued to be what they primarily are: a device to obscure identity, an unwillingness to "come out" to the public (Choudhuri).

## CONCLUSION

Queer theory in the field of post-structuralist critical theory in western literary criticism emerged in the early 1990s out of the fields of queer studies and women's studies and includes both queer readings of texts and the theorisation of 'queerness' itself. Heavily influenced by the work of Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, David Halperin, José Esteban Muñoz, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, queer theory builds both upon feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self and upon gay/lesbian studies' close examination of the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities. However, its dominating overshadow on society is noticeable in all periods from classical antiquity to the modern age. And although represented in all cultures and throughout the ages, the Indianness of queer literature deserves special mention and detailed exploration.

Queer theory "focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire". Queerness has been associated most prominently with bisexual, lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, intersex bodies and identities, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Queer theory's attempted debunking of stable (and correlated) sexes, genders, and sexualities develops out of the specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post- structuralist figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions. Queer theory examines the discourses of homosexuality developed in the last century in order to place the "queer" into historical context, deconstructing contemporary arguments both for and against this latest terminology.

Queer identity suffers the most deplorable trauma in the present day, even though they have substantial voice today. It is ironic that despite having such a significant presence in both the outer and inner world, they are still invisible – unacknowledged and stripped of their existence. The best that still happens is their forceful merger with the mainstream, which further complicates the situation. Having presence in the past, and also in the present, the 'queer' is still the 'subaltern' entity which is apprehensive about its existence in the future. On the other hand, works such as *The Editor or Housewife*, exposes the everyday ridicule that the gendered-behavioral society brings upon an individual. Anything beyond the established parameters is a

threat, and should be violently crushed in order to ‘cure’ mankind of its ‘sins’. This paper presented with ample instances to exemplify the same and dispel this myth. In mythology, which forms a basis for several cultural practices in the daily life, and in the society of pre-colonial India, queer co-existed with the mainstream. Then it went behind the curtains with the British Anti-Sodomy Law (Section 377), and has now reappeared again with significant knowledge, presence and courage, to fight for their existence, only to a more rigid audience with a contorted sense of morality.

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