



# A Perspective Review and Analysis of the Role of Socio-Cultural Influences in Shaping and Designing of the Queer and Gay Identities in India.

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## Abstract:

In the modern era, the major LGBT groups and style guides suggest the word *gay* to describe homosexual men, or people attracted to members of the same sex. Presently, Gays are divided on the lines of caste, class, race, location and ethnicity, and these social differences come into play in molding their identities. Identity is important for LGBT community because it "...gives a sense of assertion of one's individuality and social self... identity as all- encompassing, as well as separate identities of lesbian women, gay men and trans diverse populations" (Stange, 2011). Indian identities, socially constructed, are often at variance with each other, and can be studied only within the framework of social and cultural contexts. This paper seeks to throw light on the role of socio-cultural influences in shaping the identities of gays in India. Indian society's rigid norms on sexual identities and prejudices against people who have different sexual identities deny gays their social identity and push them to obscurity. Coming to terms with the reality of having a sexual identity that is met with disdain and disapproval, the gays camouflage their identities for fear of ridicule. There is no single gay identity because of the diversity of gay lives in various cultures. A case in point is that of diasporic gays, who encounter conflicts of being gays and outsiders, face cultural estrangement, and are alienated from society at large. This paper, thus, seeks to study the contributing factors that define the lives of gays.

**Keywords:** Queer Theory, Gay identities, Social Constructs, Cultural contexts, Obscurity

## 1. Introduction: The Queer Theory

Queer theory, as the very name indicates, analyses sexual identities that are deviant and non-conforming. Queer theory views non-conforming sexualities/sexual identities as socially constructed ones that produce their own

meaning. As is the case with feminist theories, Queer theory does not accept the notion that sexuality is based on biological sex or two-sex theory. Sexuality is fluid, with some people being drawn to people of same sex, while others are drawn to people of both the sexes. Sexuality is amorphous and tends to change at various points of an individual's life. Sexual definitions have become rigid only since 19<sup>th</sup> century, queer theorists point out. This rigidity has resulted in homophobic attitudes towards people of different sexual orientations. In one of her interviews, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says: "Queer theory is about trying to understand different kinds of sexual desire and how the culture defines them..." (Sedgwick, 1998).

Annamarie Jagose in *Queer Theory: An Introduction* opines that "... Queer used to be a slang word for homosexuals and was used for homophobic abuse. Recently the term has been used as an umbrella for a coalition of sexual identities that are culturally marginalized..." (Jagose, 1996) Queer theory points to the prevalence of multiple identities and the social factors that contribute to their shaping. "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant ... It is an identity without an essence..." (Halperin, 1997) Through rigorous review process, this paper seeks to shed light on the socio-cultural influences that shape the functioning of gays. A single homosexual identity will not work in shaping the gay identities because sexuality is shaped by caste, class, religious differences, and ethnicity among others.

## 2. The Lineage of Queer Literature

The book that set the tone for the development of Queer Theory is *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). This book delves into how Western society/world perceives sexuality and gender. There are two views regarding the formation of sexuality and gender. While the first view emphasizes that a few people are born gay and only those who have queer traits are interested in them, the second one lays emphasis on the fact that homosexuality is important to people with multiple sexual orientations. Identity is not a fixed one; though not everyone is bisexual, "...everyone is to some degree bisexual in their inherent qualities of mind and character."(Edmundson, 1991) *Same Sex Love in India* (2001) by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai "collates literature with research, fiction with fact, and myths with their traditional manifest forms; thereby creating a conclusive and comprehensive work detailing the interpretations and normative location of sexualities in the Indian context, in a space and time continuity..." (Mukherjee, 2017).The book buttresses the prevalence of same –sex love in Indian society from times of yore, and establishes that homosexuality was not brought in from the West

The development of Queer literature can be traced to the last quarter of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first century. The writers who have contributed to this genre include Ruth Vanita, Saleem Kidwai, and Hoshang Merchant among others. Their writings have brought to light the plight of people with different sexual identities in a rigid society, which does not offer place for same-sex relationships. Heterosexuality need not be the crux of all relationships, the writers contend. In *Gay Icons of India*, Hoshang Merchant says: "One can see that there is no monolithic lesbian or queer collective in India."(Merchant, 2019).This is a pointer to the disparateness of Queers across cultures.

“Belonging to LGBT community gives a sense of assertion of one’s individuality and social self...identity as all encompassing, as well as separate identities of lesbian women, gay men and trans diverse populations.” (Stange, 2011) Indian identities, socially constructed, are more often at variance with each other, and can be studied only within the framework of social and cultural contexts. The lives of gays in India are often conditioned by caste, class, religion, and other social differences that deny them social identity in the mainstream. There is no single gay identity because of the diversity of gay lives in various cultures. A case in point is that of diasporic gays, who encounter conflicts of being gays and outsiders, face cultural estrangement, and are alienated from society at large. This paper seeks to study how social categorizations affect the lives of gays.

### 3. Alternative Sexualities and Identities

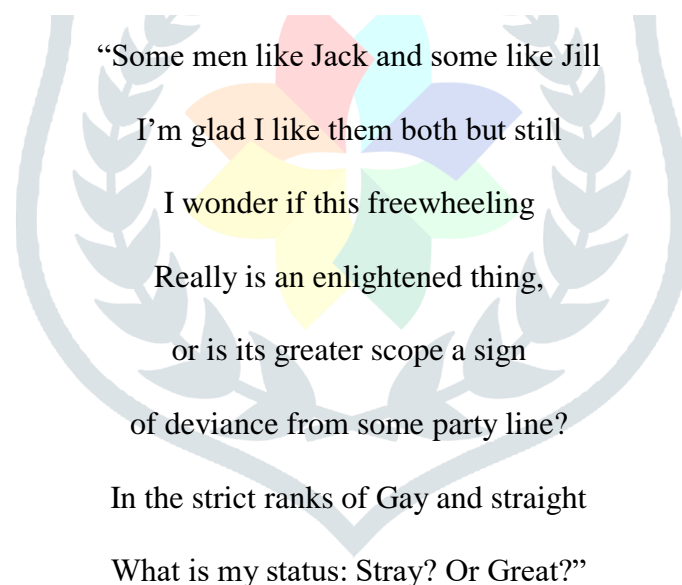
Identities contrary to established sexualities are called alternative sexualities. Sexuality is shifting/not stable, and binary constructions of sexuality are now giving way to multiple sexual identities. The Indian lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) movement is bringing to the fore the diverse sexualities that have been in vogue in our cultures since times of yore. The movement rejects single identities and advocates space for multiple sexual orientations in a society. At a national Queer conference, Gopi Shankar Madurai, an equal rights activist had remarked: “Hindu society had a clear idea of all these people in the past. Now that we have put them under one label ‘LGBT’ there is lot more confusion and other identities have got hidden...” (Madurai, 2013) This clearly indicates that homosexuality was an innate part of Indian society of yore before it met with disapproval and condemnation.

People have several layers of identity and the fact that there is a divergence between a person’s sexual orientation/identity and his/her practices points to the multifaceted aspects of sexuality. Remarking on the intersectional nature of sexuality, Dennis Altman points out:

...the experience of sexuality in everyday life is shaped by such variables as the gap between city and country; ethnic and religious differences; and hierarchies of health, education, and age. The idea of a gay or lesbian/gay community assumes that such differences can be subordinated to an overarching sense of sexual identity, myth that is barely sustainable... (Altman, 1996)

#### 4. The Gay Literature

The Term ‘Gay’ dates to long back where it was originally used to mean "carefree", "cheerful", or "bright and showy." But slowly it assimilated a derogatory connotation which was a victim of harsh ridicule in some parts of the world. Due to the influence of social media and the emergence of publishing houses like Queer Ink, many people are coming out in the open to proclaim their sexual identity. Keshav Suri, an Indian LGBTQ activist proclaims his gay identity by saying: “I am a proud member of the LGBTQI community in India. I have no qualms in admitting that I have been in a committed relationship with an adult male for a decade...Being a member of the community, I have first-hand knowledge of the trials and tribulations faced by them in India." (livemint.com).Among the various slogans put forth by Queer Nation to lend support to the rights of LGBT members, none is more forthcoming than “We’re here. We’re queer. Get used to it" (Rand, 2004). The objective of gay literature is to create a specific “homosexual discourse in the modern academic and cultural realm in India.” (Dey, 2014) Vikram Seth’s “Dubious” sings paeans to people who do not wish to toe the line of heterosexual relationships.



Gay literature, thus, according to *Kilian Meloy*, is “... a fairly new innovation, and the current concept of homosexuality is even fresher from the cultural oven. It's no great surprise, then, that gay literature — or even gay characters in literature — are so relatively new as to still be shiny” (Meloy, 2007).According to Hoshang Merchant, the term homosexual, which is not of Indian origin, cannot be used holistically to refer to an Indian gay because it is an “umbrella term” used for both male and female having same sex relationships (Merchant, 2009).

Society's rigid norms on sexual identities and deep-rooted prejudices against people who choose different sexual orientation push the gays to obscurity. They face estrangement from the rest of the heterosexual society, which does not endorse sexual identities that go against the established ones. The gays struggle to come to terms with the reality of having a different sexual identity that is met with scorn and ridicule and makes them to camouflage their identities. Commenting on the fluid nature of identity, Annamarie Jagose says "...identities and sexualities are inflected by heterosexuality, race, gender and ethnicity..." (Jagose, 1996).

## 5. A Brief Overview of the rise of Gays in India

The term 'gay' has acquired a pejorative meaning over the years to refer to a person of deviant sexual behavior. The early traces of homosexuality can be found in Indian religious texts, stories, murals and other art forms. Even though Indian religious texts do not explicitly endorse homosexuality, characters drawn to same-sex people are found in epics, Vedas and Mahabharata. For example, Shikhandi in Mahabharata, Mohini avatar of Lord Vishnu, and Ardhanarishwara, the half-male and half-female body of Lord Shiva all bear testimony to the prevalence of homosexuality in India's mythology. Thus, it is evident that homosexuality is not of a recent origin; it was in vogue in ancient times, though Indian society was not open to it. During the rule of British, homosexuality was prohibited on the grounds that it went against the grain. In post-colonial India, homosexuality was criminalized on the pretext of morality and it did not gain social approbation.

It was only after relentless struggles that same-sex relationships were decriminalized in India. Decriminalization, a watershed moment for people with different sexual identities, has paved the way for them to assert their rights and express their identities. The lives of homosexual people, which were shrouded in mystery hitherto, are now coming to light, thanks to the socio-cultural changes that happened in India after the advent of liberalization and globalization. The social metamorphosis and the changing perceptions of identities have thus shaped the rise of gays in India.

## 6 Socio-Cultural Influences on the Gay Identities

R. Raj Rao's *The Boy Friend*, the first gay novel in India, focuses on the issues of class, caste, religion and gay culture in India. Set against the backdrop of Mumbai riots in 1992, the novel narrates the story of a gay journalist Yudi, and his sexual encounter with a Dalit boy Milind Mahadik. Through the story of Yudi and Milind Mahadik, one gets a glimpse of the lives of the marginalized sections of society in Mumbai. The novelist delves into the pressing issues of caste, class and religious differences within the ambit of sexuality and

shows how social constructs shape the identities of people. *The Boy Friend* depicts the plight of gays in a coercive heterosexual society, which denies them space and pushes them to the fringes. The novel also exposes the linkage between sexual and national identity, and Ruth Vanita points out this interplay by stating: “Gender based anxieties are deeply intertwined with anxieties around religious, community and national identities...” (Vanita, 2001)

Rahul Mehta’s *Quarantine* narrates the lives of Indo- American gays, who are caught between two cultures – being gays on one hand, and being outsiders on the other hand. They face cultural clashes as a result of this dichotomy, are confused over their identities, face hostility for their different sexual orientation, and struggle to gain social approbation. Their failures stem from the fact that they are uprooted from their roots, culturally detached, and find it difficult to bond with their families. Trying to come to terms with the issues of cultural estrangement and quest for identity, the characters find themselves alienated from the mainstream. Thus they represent the dislocation and loss of identity of Indo-American gays.

Vivek Shreya’s *She of the Mountains* depicts the struggles of a gay in Canada, who tries to find his identity/self. He is often taunted by people’s barbs calling him a gay. He realizes that there are certain norms expected of gays and that he needs to conform to them. He finds it difficult to fit into them and becomes a misfit. When he falls in love with a woman, much against the conventions for gays, his identity is at stake. He is often haunted by the world’s perception of him as a gay, who must adhere to the societal dictates imposed on gays. The novel exposes the evolving nature of people, who adapt new identities in order to fit into a changing society.

## 7. Conclusion

R. Raj Rao’s *The Boy Friend*, Rahul Mehta’s *Quarantine* and Vivek Shreya’s *She of the Mountains* provide a slice of gay life across cultures. The socio-economic changes coupled with liberalization accelerated slow cultural changes and ushered in cultural transformation in India. Thanks to rapid urbanization, demographic explosion, and change in lifestyle people are developing new sexual identities, which were hitherto suppressed by rigid social norms and dictates. Since 2000s, gays and lesbians are slowly trying to gain social acceptance but still there is stigmatization against people who have different sexual identities. By restricting the term gender to only male and female, other identities are excluded from the framework. Remarking on the nature of identities, Ruth Vanita points out: “heterosexuality and heteronormativity are no longer the basis of all social relationships and identities” (Vanita, 2001). Sexuality is intersectional, and the role of socio-cultural influences cannot be overlooked while understanding the lives of people with multiple identities.

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