
Respectably queer? Queer visibility and homophobia in Hindi literature

by

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Abstract: This paper focuses on some Hindi literary texts presenting LGBT protagonists. While literature in English from India has recently shown the production of texts by LGBT authors, this seems to be totally absent in literature in Hindi. Nevertheless, “homosexual stories” have been represented in a number of novels, short stories, and non-fictional texts, both in the past and in recent times. I will analyze the way these texts construe “the homosexual” in order to discuss whether they can be considered LGBT literature, defined both as the corpus of texts written for and by the LGBT communities, and as texts focussing on issues, characters, and narratives related to those communities. I will problematize the notion of gender and the heterocentred stance that remains visible even in texts that were considered highly challenging when published.

In search of Hindi khus literature

Before discussing the specific topic of this article, I would like to position it by saying a few words on gender studies in the academic world I work in, more specifically regarding the study of South Asia. Women/gender studies became institutionally formalized in Italy only in the late 1990s and remain generally “masked”, hidden within single courses and inside separated disciplines. As for postmodern and/or postcolonial critique and diaspora studies, while these are flourishing in other departments, they seem to be absent from the field of South Asian studies in Italy. The result is that gender is generally not considered as an academically relevant field of research in Italian Indology. Not long time ago, in an official PhD seminar, a colleague of mine specializing in Sanskrit and Indian Philosophy defined researchers (like me) investigating gender issues as persons affected by “linguistic tics such as gender politics”, following “cultural fashions”. My students and colleagues tend to qualify their research procedures and findings as factual, objective and divorced from personal values and interests – feminist or otherwise – and write

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themselves out of their final projects. As the pace of work is hectic and time is always pressing, practical methodical questions usually take precedence over a thorough inquiry into the researchers' own epistemic locations, agency and convictions. I am radically critical of this situation, and I am convinced that a serious reconsideration of methods and techniques used in Italy in the study not only of Hindi Language and Literature, but of South Asia in general is badly needed. As for the Hindi literary field, the exploration of issues of sexuality, power, and marginalized populations (the "Other") in literature and culture has long been confined to writings by middle class, hegemonic authors. Even today, when Dalit literature has entered Indian university curricula, queer theory is confined to sociological analysis. It may touch some Departments of English, but cannot aspire to gain access to Hindi Departments, where, quoting Uday Prakāś, one feels like having "been transported by a time machine to another place and time" (2001: 48). If we want to imagine a future for studies on home and belonging, identity, subjectivity, otherness and so on, queer studies too must be taken into account. Notions of body, territory, globalization can be analyzed as problematic in relation to queerness, insofar as queer people are at best tolerated by society: they may be legally recognized, but often they are a sort of non-expelled diaspora within society. Therefore it must be investigated whether queerness is a legal condition, a scholarly construct, or a subjective experience. This article is my present contribution on this issue, focusing on some specimens of Hindi literature dealing with queerness.

In Hindi various terms are used in order to talk about queer issues: *kuīr* is the transcription of the English "queer", but it is not common; *khuś*, is the Hindi term for "happy, gay", and is generally used by queer people to describe themselves. The most common term in essays and published material is *samlaiṅgik*, of the same sex. I have written elsewhere about issues regarding Hindi queer literature (Alessandra Consolaro 2011, 300-308): if queer literature is to be considered as the corpus of literary texts produced by and for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, that is the queer – hence the acronym LGBTIQ that is used in some queer literature – communities, or dealing with topics and presenting characters and plots that are of interest for those communities, then some *khuś* texts are available in Hindi literature. Yet, the homophobic character of many of them has been pointed out in the pioneering work by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (2000). Cecilia Coscio (2003) translated into Italian and analyzed two Hindi short stories with *hijra* protagonists: Rāmbābū Nīrav's *Aurat na hone kā dard* (The sorrow of not being a woman) and *Lāvāris ke vāris* (Heirs of heirless people) by Anītā Rākeś. Also the studies by scholars like Giti Thadani (1996), Ashwini Sukthankar (1999), and Maya Sharma (2006), focusing on lesbian issues, have shown the gap between a common representation of queer people in films or literary works as borderline bugs, criminals, mentally sick, or persons deprived of heterosexual coitus, and the – difficult, but real – life of people who do not conform to any single sexual category and do not seek acceptance, who, confident of their preferences, simply exist and struggle.

The existing literature on queer writing in Hindi analyzes texts that are decades old. This paper is a small contribution to update these studies, focusing on two pieces of Hindi fiction written around 2009. This is an important date for Indian queer

communities. In that year, the High Court of Delhi struck Section 377 out of the Indian Penal Code which criminalized sexual activity “against the order of nature” (Arvind Narrain and Alok Gupta 2011). Emboldened by legal recognition and a rapidly growing “khush rights movement”, queer Indians started to speak out (Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan 2005; Gautam Bhan 2006). As queer theorists all over the world have challenged assumptions of heteronormativity – the belief that heterosexuality is “normal” while any other sexual preference is not – also in India there has been a discussion about de-centering of normativity, and India’s own pride parade has become a rather vibrant one.

Also the literary and publishing field has been affected by this vitality. In 2010 publisher Shobhna Kumar and editor Minal Hajratwala – both lesbians of Indian origin – founded Queer Ink, an online retailer specializing in books on sexuality and gender. They also organized the first Queer Book Fair held in the country, with “identity” as the central theme. The 2011 Mumbai LitFest hosted a panel discussion titled “Queer Writing: Do We Need Such A Category?”, with the participation of Giti Thadani, Shobhna Kumar, Hoshang Merchant, Jerry Pinto and others. The 2012 Jaipur literary festival – Asia’s largest literary festival – introduced the first panel on queer writing, and while threats from conservative religious activists against Salman Rushdie forced him to pull out of the festival, the conversation between Raj Rao and Hoshang Merchant caused little to no stir. As early as 2004, Yoda Press – an independent publishing venture based in New Delhi focusing on the “non-mainstream, alternative contemporary India” – launched an interdisciplinary series called “Sexualities”, edited by Gautam Bhan, taking “an intersectional approach as the basis of its understanding of sexuality, seeing it as inextricably linked with the politics of class, caste, religion, language, and location in contemporary India” (yodapress.in/Sexuality.html). But before 2009, queer writing had made only sporadic appearances in India. Today, although little of this genre is read, new voices and books have begun to make small inroads into the literary mindscape and the publishing scene. The publishers are also becoming aware that there are readers who identify themselves as queer, and after the repealing of Sec 377 of IPC, writers became more confident about articulating their views. This notwithstanding, it took Queer Ink months to protect authors by ensuring that the legal responsibility for the book’s content was with the publisher, not with the individual authors, should the work ultimately be deemed offensive under India’s indecency laws. And even so, many of the authors still choose to remain anonymous. A further complication comes by the fact that in December 2013 section 377 was reinstated by a Supreme Court ruling, which held that amending or repealing Section 377 should be a matter left to Parliament, not the judiciary.

There seems to be a split between the “*khush* movement” and “*khush* writing”. While the former is moving towards acceptance in civil society, the latter is still not very visible and audible. Stories and novels from writers should be read not because of their own or their characters’ gender preferences, but irrespective of gendered concerns, and queer writing has to be read as an integral and evolving part of world literature, important and self-sustaining. Introducing a separate category for queer writing may be interpreted as creating a closed-off ghetto, but on the other

hand, mainstream literary criticism, which is the only way to get visibility, tends to not consider it at all.

Another issue regards the widespread notion that queer outing is linked to the adoption of a Western lifestyle. With the growing instances of right-wing groups taking up the role of protectors of “Indian culture”, life is certainly not a bed of roses for the *khus* writers. On the other hand, India has always had one of the world’s richest treasures of same-sex and gender-transgressing stories, since ancient times. Devdutt Pattanaik (2002) wrote on sexual transformation, gender metamorphosis, and alternative sexualities in ancient Hindu texts, but he also pointed out that these myths and tales have to be inscribed in a heterosexual and patriarchal construct, where sex change, cross-dressing, same-sex intercourse, and other queer activities are bound to be considered undesirable, as they threaten the dominant discourse. Queer scholars like Ruth Vanita (2002), and writers like Hoshang Merchant (2000), have emphasized that terms like *yārānā* or *sākhīyānī*, connoting great tenderness in same-sex bonding – both male-male and female-female – refer to a cultural heritage that has been present in India for centuries. With more authors choosing queer themes for their work, a same-sex story no longer remains taboo for Indian writers. Queer fiction in English flourishes, English being the language of urban middle-class people, the social group that has mostly been affected by the “pink revolution”. On the contrary, there is relatively less noise about it in regional languages. This is one of the reasons why queer writing in languages other than English should also be investigated.

Paṁkhvālī nāv and Āmdhere kā gaṇit

When I started exploring the Hindi literary field in order to find samples of recent queer literature, I found out that little was available. *Tirohit*, a novel by Gītāñjali Śrī published in 2001, is about the friendship of two women that might have also some lesbian shades. The main characters are two women having a very close relationship allowing for strong intimacy: they share everything, sleep together, and in one scene they are shown on the roof, stripping naked in intimacy (Gītāñjali Śrī 2001, pp.158-160). When I interviewed the author, she rejected the idea that the text suggests any lesbian relation, pointing out that this is a Western way of reading things that does not necessarily fit the Indian context (Alessandra Consolaro 2007, pp.131-132). Actually, in highly gender-segregated societies, such as India, same-sex friendship and spaces are generally more approved of by parents than opposite-sex friendship and mixed gender space. Free mixing of sexes is not allowed, especially after puberty is reached, and a person spends much time with members of the same sex. Having friendship or emotional attachment in such relationships is quite common, and even when sexual behaviors develop, sexual engagement is not displayed publicly and leaving the family to assert individual liberty and rights is preferred. In this social context, homosocial behaviors such as sharing a bed, body massaging, and hugging or kissing between same sex members is not interpreted as homosexual relationships.

My attention was later attracted by *Paṁkhvālī nāv* (The winged boat), a novel published in 2009 by Paṁkaj Biṣṭ. I had read about it on Sunīl Dīpak’s blog *Jo na*

kah sake, who had commented about it when it was published in installments in *Haṃs* in 2007 (Sunīl Dīpak 2007). When I talked to Sunīl about my research, he offered to help me establish contacts, and he published a post inviting Hindi writers to contact him if they wanted to share any texts related to queer issues (Sunīl Dīpak 2013). Not much happened, but after some time he received the short story *Āmdhere kā gaṇit* (*Darkness figuring*) by Paṅkaj Subīr, which he forwarded to me. The author introduced it as a *carcit kahānī*, an expression that in the Hindi field means a piece of fiction that has had wide circulation among literati. It was published in *Kathākram*, a leading Hindi literary magazine, and was included in the short story collection *Īṣṭ Inḍiyā Kampanī* (East India Company), published by Bhārtīya Jñānpīṭh, which was awarded the New Writing Award by the same institution in 2008. *Paṅkhvālī nāv* and *Āmdhere kā gaṇit* – which, to my knowledge, have not yet been translated into any European language, which justifies the presence of extensive plot summaries in this article – are written by educated, middle-class, straight male authors who wish to address a topic that is considered taboo in the Hindi field: the issue of “men having sex with men”. This definition, which arose within the sexual health NGO movement in the early 1990s, is sometimes meant to be a “more culturally appropriate” term for same-sex sexual interaction between men (Chakrapani Venkatesan *et al.* 2002), but has been discussed (Rebecca M Young and Ilan H. Meyer 2005).

Born on 20 February 1946 in Mumbai, Paṅkaj Biṣṭ is a socially active intellectual who has engaged in several intense debates. After working for over thirty years in different positions with Ministry of Information – including editing of magazines such as *Akāśvāṇī* and *Ājkal* – he took early retirement in 1999 in order to devote himself to independent writing and publishing. Since then he has been involved in publishing and editing the thought-provoking Hindi monthly *Samayāmtar* (Time-lapse), a “little magazine” whose first avatar was in the 70s – it was a powerful voice of dissent during the Emergency – and is entirely devoted to contemporary issues concerned with radical social and political engagements. This magazine has many readers and also a few enemies, as it relentlessly reports on irregularities and malpractices in various institutions meant to promote Hindi language and literature, highlighting discussion on important but neglected issues in Hindi media, and translating serious analysis published elsewhere in English. Paṅkaj Biṣṭ is a renowned fiction writer, who has published two other novels (*Le-kin darvāzā*, 1982 and *Us cīriyā kā nām*, 1989) and many collections of short stories (among which *Āmdhere se* with Asgar Vajāhat 1976; *Pandrah jamā paccīs*, 1980; *Bacce gavah nahīm ho sakte?*, 1985; *Golu aur Bholu*, 1994).

Paṅkaj Subīr (born 1975) lives in Sehore, MP. He is an established representative of the so-called “New generation” of Hindi fiction writers and poets, and was awarded the 2010 New Writing Award by Bhārtīya Jñānpīṭh for his novel *Ye vo sahar to nahīm*. Besides *Īṣṭ Inḍiyā Kampanī*, he published another collection of short stories (*Mahuā ghaṭvārin aur anya kahāniyām*). He also writes Hindi poetry and *gāzal*-s, and is a blogger (*Sīthor*, <http://sehore.blogspot.it/>; *Subīr samvād sevā*, <http://www.subeerin.blogspot.it/>).

Both authors are apparently animated by concern and empathy towards the protagonists of their fiction, who are queer men. Both texts address the issue of how in

India *khus* sex is easier to find than *khus* love, because sex needs only short bouts of privacy, while love – meant as a stable socially-recognized relationship – needs the partners to deal with family and society. In the end, both fictions show the intense prejudice against lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people that is still widespread in India, resulting in what would be described as “homophobic texts” in Europe. The public opinion has increasingly opposed sexual orientation discrimination, but expressions of hostility toward lesbians and gay men remain common in contemporary society and official expressions of homophobia continued even after the decriminalization of homosexuality. In 2011 Gulam Nabi Azad, the Minister of Health and Family Welfare, made a public statement reflecting the widespread social attitude to homosexuality, considering it as a disease to be cured, an abnormality to set right, and a crime to be punished. In December 2013 the Supreme Court upheld the constitutional validity of Section 377 of the IPC, which criminalizes gay and lesbian sex, causing growing fears of discrimination among India’s sexual minorities, and reviving the debate about consensual relationships between adults and sexual preferences as individual choices.

Pamkhvālī nāv introduces a character named Vikram Siṃh, an advertisement painter telling the story of Anupam Kumār, a creative director who joins his company, named Image India, in Delhi in 1986 (Paṃkaj Biṣṭ 2009: 18. Page numbers are given in brackets in the text; all translations from Hindi are mine). The structure of the novel is quite straightforward and conventional. The opening and closing chapters build a frame: “thirteen years later” Vikram with a former colleague from Delhi visit Anupam’s mother in an old house in Dehradun; in between a long flashback recalls some events in the life of Anupam. This chronological setting positions the narrated events around the neoliberal turn in India, which took shape at the beginning of the 1990s. The novel is informed by an unflinching heteronormativity. Although several decades of research and clinical experience have led mainstream medical and mental health organizations in the USA and Europe to conclude that LGBTIQ etc. orientations represent normal forms of human experience, and that these relationships are normal forms of human bonding, Anupam is portrayed as a disturbed person, following a widespread stereotype: “Eternal instability, restlessness, and scandal were constantly following Anupam” (100). He is represented as a very talented person: he is extremely clever, speaks very good Hindi and English, is a gifted poet with published poems. He is also technologically advanced, being acquainted with computers, which at that time was not a common skill in India. But he is described as an instable person, stubborn, individualistic, unable to cooperate and collaborate with other people, almost violent, and introverted: “A strange alertness prevented him to open up”, “he was constantly disquiet like a radar antenna searching out something” (15), “he would never speak out clearly his ideas and projects, but he would rather put them on in bits and pieces, like a chess player, so that people working with him could not guess until the end which direction he was taking the game and how it would end” (16). Last but not least, he behaves in a “European” way (15). His salary is very high, but he can never save money and he keeps on changing jobs as he is a liar, constantly quarrelling with his colleagues, and is surrounded by a bad reputation. He even gets into debt because of some dubious relations he entertains with lovers who are drug ad-

dicts, and other unreliable people. His acquaintances are mostly people living at the fringes of respectability, moving in a space constructed as deviant, somewhat dirty, often un-Indian, not respectable, repugnant, unnatural, and pathological. His whole experience is a sum of stereotypes about queer people: for instance, that the relationships of lesbians and gay men are necessarily dysfunctional, unhappy and unstable, and that the goals and values of queer couples are ineluctably different from those of heterosexual couples. The final judgment on Anupam is that he “was victim of this personality disorder: if this was not perversion, he had somehow, in some other way strayed from the path, and he was now oppressed by this, but was not ready to admit it” (87).

On the contrary, the narrator is a champion of conformity to social patriarchal norms: he is married, has two children, he spends his evenings and nights going out and drinking with male friends while his wife Sumitrā happily waits for him within the domestic walls, and dutifully worries if he is late. She is characterized by a “motherly, uterine (she is the second sister of three brothers) and extremely vehement altruistic nature”, which is immediately aroused when she gets to know about Vikram’s strange and lonely friend (37). The confinement of the wife in the protected household space reminds the reader that in India urban public spaces are symbolically and literally occupied by men, while women occupy a disproportionately smaller percentage of public space in cities, even though they comprise approximately fifty percent of the population. If women are in urban public spaces, they are usually with a man or in a group – with other women and/or men– and are pressed to occupy this public space as “respectable” middle-class and upper-middle-class women – as compared with the role played by sex workers (Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade 2011). No wonder Vikram, an icon of middle-class heteronormativity, “spontaneously” and “naturally” exhibits his masculinity whenever a good-looking woman is around, and is even gratified when he finds out that Anupam is in love with him, although he rejects any behavior that might endanger his status of righteous man, upholder of the straight patriarchal order. When Anupam makes a pass at him, he expresses disgust (57-58).

Vikram is convinced that sex is only justified within a married couple, and that in any case its natural goal is reproduction. Anything else is dangerous and/or perverted. Interestingly enough, though he describes himself as not caring about his body, he is very pleased to repeatedly stress how his well-built, tall body is better looking than other bodies, especially the bodies of gay men, who appear to him as being in love with their own body. In a passage the narrator happens to meet Anupam’s former lover, and immediately notes with masculine pride that he is not very good looking, especially if compared to himself (97).

His feeling of physical and moral superiority is well exemplified also by the passage telling his encounters with Śarmiṣṭhā. She is an extremely beautiful woman with whom Anupam has a complex relationship, having performed with her an “experiment”, a sort of medical test that proved his inability to coition, and that is described by the narrator as a “failure”. When they first meet, Vikram starts flirting with her, exhibiting his straight and manly nature. Later, commenting on this, he explains it as “a sort of defense mechanism”, due to the fact that he is “constantly agitated and alert” when he is with Anupam (70). Śarmiṣṭhā, who is not confirming

to the role prescribed by heteronormativity, is herself a “failure”: she is adulterous, constantly in search of thrill, willing to have a triangled relation with Anupam and her husband, ready to have an affair with Vikram. This is outrageous for the narrator, who strongly stigmatizes this behavior.

Vikram is the only person in the office who enters into a friendly relationship with Anupam, as the latter has a peculiar ability to turn everybody against him. Vikram listens to Anupam’s reasoning about the need to come out of the closet, to discuss and reject fixed gender roles, to reformulate notions of motherhood and sexuality. The novel is replete with a repertoire of arguments about homosexuality and the modern world, yet the final stance is that there is no place for people like Anupam in this society. This is another pivotal aspect of the novel, and it is also one of the bulwarks of the conservative argument on the topic in India. Queer orientation and behavior are definitely linked to Western influence, as if they were an imported phenomenon connected to the exposure to an external culture. Anupam is fond of music and poetry, and many passages contain enumerations about writers, singers, and painters, creating a sort of queer canon: classic paperbacks (Borges, Marquez, Calvino, Vargas Llosa, Rushdie, Eco) plus some romantic novels and thrillers; biographies of Charlie Chaplin, Pablo Neruda, Isadora Duncan, a collection of letters by Oscar Wilde, and some classic collections of poetry by Rimbaud, Rilke, Lorca, Muktibodh, Firaq and Galib. Anupam emotionally recites *Two Loves* by Lord Alfred Douglas, presenting also a Hindi translation of it, and quotes the famous *gāzal* by Iqbal containing a couplet mentioning Mahmud Ghaznavi’s young male lover. Anupam’s flat exhibits paintings by Bhupen Khakkar – a pioneering Indian gay artist – but also Michelangelo’s famous naked statue of David; moreover, he listens almost compulsively to cassettes by Bach, Mozart, Chopin, and Zubin Mehta’s concerts. As for rock music, he likes Bob Dylan, and is a particular fan of Freddy Mercury, whose Indian origins he stresses as if to prove that being queer and being Indian are not antonymous, even if Freddy Mercury’s unruly life and death by AIDS are eventually used by Vikram as an argument in favor of the opposite position. The narrator, in fact, constructs himself conversely as naively unaware of the queer implications of this canon. He is a “normal”, straight, sound Indian young man, who can barely speak simple English, who does not know who Oscar Wilde was, and is shocked when he finds out what “other kind of love” caught David, Jonathan, Plato, Michelangelo and Shakespeare. He likes old *filmī* songs – just the old ones, he specifies, “up to the 70s” – and cannot even understand Indian classical music, but enjoys “soft classical” such as *gāzal*-s.

In a sense, there is no real friendship between the protagonists of the novel: Anupam is constantly portrayed as situated in a minority position, while Vikram plays the role of the elder brother, patronizing the subaltern younger man. Anupam is prey to a *cupio dissolvi*, he seems doomed to a bad end, and in fact he will die, a suicide, in Goa – another icon of postmodern and Western lifestyle. As for Vikram, he distances himself from Anupam in an effort to maintain his good reputation, and when the latter moves abroad, their relation becomes purely nominal. Notwithstanding this, there is an episode that shows a strong emotional tie between both men, when Vikram bids farewell to Anupam at the airport: there is a strong embrace, and suddenly the narrator runs away, hides himself in the toilet and bursts

into tears. After a while, a cleaner consoles him telling him that even if his younger brother has gone, one should not be so childishly emotional. In public, surrounded by other men, Vikram feels compelled to recover and avoid any further inquiry. On leaving the airport he recalls a song by Freddy that Anupam often sang: *I was born to love you!* (98-99). In this passage a sort of narcissism can be detected, as the “straight” man is gratified by the very idea that he is the object of desire of another man, even if he does not openly respond to this feeling.

A feature shared by both *Paṃkhvālī nāv* and *Āmdhere kā gaṇit* is the explanation of the insurgence of queer orientation in the protagonists. Endorsing the Freudian explanation of homosexuality, in *Paṃkhvālī nāv* Vikram reads Anupam’s relation to women as a reaction to his mother’s dominating behavior: after the death of his father he grew up with a possessive mother and sister, who were very protective. His attraction to men and the idealization of women is attributed to this lack of a masculine figure in his childhood. The text cursorily explains that lesbians also behave this way because of their husbands’ impotency (74-75). But the main cause for what is considered a sexual deviation is the fact that both male characters experienced gang rape in adolescence. Anupam is gang raped in college by a group of youngsters led by his childhood friend who would then become his lover/master. He survives an attempted suicide, and from then he starts a series of sexual relations with lovers whose nicknames – blind, bellied, dwarf, Vibhīṣaṇ, Tuḡlak, Nādirśāh, Hitler – show both his victimizing role, and a despising feeling.¹

The unnamed protagonist of *Āmdhere kā gaṇit* also gets his sexual initiation at the wedding procession of a friend’s brother: a group of drinking adults make him drink, and later rape him while he is sleeping in intoxication. He has few memories of the event, apart from pain. Sometime later a friend explains to him what had happened, and they establish a *sāthī* relationship. This implies physical intimacy, but does not involve an emotional attachment or involvement: the sexual experience is constantly described as devoid of real pleasure, but is rather an irrational fit of madness, “volcano eruption”, “fire in the dark jungle”, “a silent journey in cold sparks” that he keeps on looking for in what psychoanalysis would define as traumatic fixation. Throughout the short story there is no mention of pleasure, care, affection, or love: there is just physical need, something that is not consciously understandable. Everything connected to it happens in the dark, is not clearly visible (keywords are: fog, haze, shadow) and happens in a frenzy. There is a clear contraposition between this “figuring in the darkness” and “normal” life in the light, the world where life goes on “at its usual speed, the same manners, school, college, job, all the same”.

The protagonist is a migrant in Mumbai: he hails from a qasba in Bihar and moved to Mumbai in search of a job. His life is full of loneliness, exhaustion from long commuting on local trains, but above all the obsession of sex. Meanwhile, his mother keeps on sending letters wishing to arrange his marriage. He is somewhat

¹ Vibhīṣaṇ was a king appearing in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the younger half-brother of the *rakṣas* king Rāvaṇa of Lanka who joined Rām’s army against his wicked brother. Tuḡlak was the name of a Muslim dynasty of Turkic origin which established a Delhi sultanate in India in the 14th century. Nādirśāh (1688–1747) ruled as Shah of Iran (1736–47) and is remembered for his cruelty.

attracted by “the light of wedding”, but this would imply renouncing his darkness, which he cannot do: “there is no solution for his figuring in the darkness now”.

He has no way of solving his problem, apart from visiting disreputable places: in large Indian cities, especially in metros, the “gay scene” is visible: cruising areas that serve both as pick-up areas and also as areas where men can have sex with other men. Cruising areas are frequented not only by gays, but also by other men having sex with men who resist any “gay” label. The character in the short story describes a cinema hall named “Toffees” – a nickname for male prostitutes – where he meets a shadowy character that he calls Shah Rukh Khan. Otherwise, only when he gets back to his town for a few days can he spend some time with his friend and get satisfaction. The rest is thirst, loneliness, “watching himself in the mirror”. While commuting to and from work he observes men on the train, in search of “shades of darkness” on their face: he has neither feeling, nor questioning, but only calculation, the need to satisfy his urge. Eventually, the unnamed protagonist meets a young man, Tanmay Saksenā: they happen to travel on the same train and one day, being the only passengers in a coach, they start talking. During the conversation he finds out that Tanmay too is from Bihar, and is desperately in need for a place to stay. The protagonist suggests that he moves to his place on 15th August, when he will be at home for Independence Day. At night they have sex. The experience is described as happening in darkness, with Tanmay's “warrior”, a “blurred shadow” entering the protagonist's “darkness” in a burning sensation of shattering tempest. The next morning the protagonist receives a phone call from his qasba: his friend announces that his wedding has been organized, and invites him to come soon. But the protagonist doesn't even listen to him; he just cuts the call and switches the phone off. The story ends with the protagonist wishing that he might spend ten years free from cares with Tanmay, the same way he had spent ten years with his friend. He thinks that he will probably no longer return to his qasba, now that this “calculation in the darkness” has reached another unstable solution.

The protagonist of this short story is doomed to keep his identity a secret: his partner Tanmay, the active one, is at least given a proper name, but he is denied even that, and the very idea of having committed relationships is negated. Both he and Tanmay are objectified. They do not relate to each other as human beings, but are turned into mere mechanical instruments able to satisfy some physical need. There is no self-awareness of same-sex attractions, and they do not even conceive the idea of “coming out”, as if lesbian, gay, and bisexual people's experiences were totally distant from real life, a surreal/nightmarish existence to be lived in a dark universe. The relationship described between the characters of *Āmdhere kā gaṇit* reflects both lack of self-identity and internalized homophobia. Only when there is a self-conscious queer identity can one “come out”. Today, an increasing number of middle-class Indian gays are “coming out of the closet”, much to the disapproval and consternation of their families, but that too is in very small numbers and often the media credit the growth of queer life to satellite television and the Internet. Queer relations remain in most cases a private affair.

Queer discourses

In the previous section I introduced the Hindi novel *Pamkhvālī nāv* and the Hindi short story *Āmdhere kā gaṇit*, pointing out that their treatment of queer issues confirms the persistence of heteronormative prejudices even in those authors who try to address queer issues with a sincere belief that they are being sympathetic and inclusive. One of the most powerful influences on heterosexuals' acceptance of *khus* people is having personal contact with a queer person who is not hiding his/her identity, but this is not easy in a society where heteropatriarchal ideologies of shame and duty, coupled with cultural and structural violence, continue to be powerfully articulated by post/neo-colonial forms of homophobia. The fictional texts I analyzed deal with gay men in a way that reflects some issues that are particularly relevant in order to explain both the ambivalence of straight authors when dealing with queer topics, and possibly the reason why queer literature is not very visible in Hindi. The nuances of homophobia that remain present in these texts might be better interpreted if we take into account the social meaning of sexuality in South Asia, connected as it is to a culture of shame, where family and community respect and honor holds sway, and the individual self tends to be negated before the community and family (Chakrapani Venkatesan *et al.* 2002). Sex is generally understood only in a reproductive sense, sexual behaviors are rendered invisible, and there is a general pressure to reproduce. To this can be added a widespread segregation of genders, acceptability of male homo-sociability and homo-affection, male dominance over public space and discourse.

The complex ecosystem of alternate sexual life in Indian society is governed by colonial laws, religious norms and morality, and a pseudo-urban mind-set that tends to associate sexual offences and alternate life styles. The numerous debates on *khus* sexuality in South Asia have been variously categorized, and of course they are not monolithic, but intermingle, overlap each other, and ally in disparate ways, creating new potential models for coalition and solidarity. As Suparna Bhaskaran pointed out (2004: 97-106), we can identify categories ranging from virulent homophobia to the “queer Indian fluid soul theory”, but also a ‘global queer’ narrative arguing that the global-modern gay identity is an inevitable consequence of modernity, globalization, and the exchange and movements of ideas and persons, coexisting with a position suggesting that indigenous same-sex/gender sexualities (more or less easily) coexist with postcolonial modern forms of same-sex sexualities.

In the global discourse on queerness, open sexual politics and visibility of queer identities are considered necessarily something positive: sexual and gender plurality, sexual preference, sexual identity and “coming out” have become an important indicator of a so-called “developed” society. In general, queer identities are emerging in countries broadly corresponding with the global South, which have relatively recently opened up their economies to neoliberal capital by adopting IMF-sponsored structural adjustment politics of sexual identity in newly globalizing economies.

Pamkhvālī nāv's setting in the field of advertising at the end of the 1980s reminds us that the development of queer literature in India is definitely linked to the process of globalization, trade liberalization, and opening of the Indian economy to foreign direct investment that started in 1991. Confessing one's sexual identity as a

means to uncover personal “truth” is a relatively recent phenomenon in India, where “out” queer people were not visible until the 1990s. Though the writing of romantic same-sex love stories and forms of poetry about same-sex relations that can be traced back in pre-independent India, writers of such fiction or poetry who happened to be queer hardly ever confessed their sexual identity publicly. Quite a contrary trend is observed in late 1980s-India, or more specifically in late 1990s, when authors dealing with the subject of homosexuality “came out” with their sexual identity through their writing, particularly in the preface, introduction or acknowledgement section of their books, that took the form of “confession”. This change began with a small group of writers and film makers of Indian origin whose relative openness was mostly due to their diasporic locations: they were born and brought up in the West and had successfully established themselves in the Western academic and professional world (Ratti Rakesh 1993). This “confessional” tradition also spread to queer writers based in India, such as Giti Thadani (1996) Ashwini Sukthanker (1999), Hoshang Merchant (1999), and later Salim Kidwai and Ruth Vanita (2000; Vanita 2005, 2006). Since 1991, the process of “coming out” has become more overt, at a pace that can indeed be called a revolution, and has spread from creative writing to political action and assertion of one's own identity, and a demand for a queer-space.

Parallel to the arrival of multinational and transnational corporations, India also saw the appearance of multinational and transnational NGOs, focusing on three “hot topics”: HIV/AIDS prevention, promoting sexual health and sexual rights, and reproductive health. Their primary purpose was to collaborate with indigenous organizations and act as a financial and technical support, providing agency (<http://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/india/>), with the effect that local NGO-businesses also mushroomed in every part of the country (<http://www.infosem.org/orgs.htm>). AIDS discourses largely produced India as a “sexually repressed” and “sexually tabooed” society, in which HIV spreads faster than in the West (Subir K. Kole 2007). In the name of providing technical support and capacity building, the Western discourse about development was introduced into NGO programs as if it were truths and immutable norms. In order to reduce new HIV infection, Indians must be made comfortable about their own sexuality, to discuss sex openly, without discomfort: program strategies established queer film festivals, gay pride parades, queer advertising, queer films, queer networks, support groups, queer NGOs, and queer reporting (Arvind Narrain and Vinay Chandran 2011). Queer communities started a mobilization mediated by globalization, and the backlash of this new visibility was a simultaneous strengthening of “homophobic” discourses of heterosexist nationalism in India, and sometimes increased police violence, proving the saying that “a victim who can articulate their status as victim, ceases to be a victim and becomes a threat”. Even among Leftist intellectuals and activists, sexual politics was sometimes received with strong disapproval, as shown by the 1996-7 debate on homosexual rights in the eminent leftist journal *Economic and Political Weekly* shows (Vimal Balasubrahmanyam 1996; H. Srikanth 1996; Sharmila Rege 1996; H. Srikanth 1997).

What I want to emphasize is that there must be a balance between the “rights based approach” and the right for diverse societies to preserve and uphold sexual

diversity, gender plurality, sexual rights and freedom in their own way, without necessarily creating a binary opposition of both approaches. It is erroneous to argue *tout court* that societies where sexual minorities are not politically organized as LGBTIQ etc., necessarily repress queer cultures. Queer identities may emerge in different societies in different ways, and without the political rhetoric of the West that recognizes the interrelationships of social, political, economic and cultural structures far from a linear progressive model toward Western-style queerness. Gay International tries to export ideas of homosexuality and sexual difference based on nomenclatures that turn sexual politics into claims before law. This, however, reproduces the colonial categorization of sexual dissidence that reads bodies through markers of skin and sex acts that do not correspond to reproductive heteronormative familial models. This fails to account for embodied performances that defy quantification of sex/gender. Perhaps, sexual citizenship after Orientalism might move outside market-driven cultures of sex as property and legal entitlement: it might involve a liberation of epistemologies, thoughts, and desires that lie dormant within the Western scholarly and political imagination. The notion that sexual freedom has not “arrived” unless it is articulated in the English language and readily comprehensible to Western observers is based on a reductive view of sex in non-Western contexts, and in general. Globalization places the Indian body within a society of control in which Western HIV/AIDS prevention ventures, funding bodies, and secular Western feminist scholarship are all conjoined. The queer subject of “rights” is tied to global capitalist structures of aid in ways that potentially advance neocolonial power relations.

I suggest there should be a move away from sexed/gendered bodies as infantilized, victimized citizens who need to be raised to the heights of full citizenship if they are to approximate hegemonic ideas of sexual and political maturity. Vulnerable queer bodies are all used to reproduce paternalism, which masks global economic imperialism. An imagining of sexual politics that does not reproduce structures of racism, imperialism, and geopolitical power relations might involve moving away from vulnerability to a different articulation of identity remarked. This is not to underestimate the violence and silencing directed at the queer communities: like other queer individuals, also *khus* writers suffer from censorship, invisibility, lack of publishing options, political repression, backlash from families and political or religious groups, and the lack of personal confidence that can come from oppression. Yet, queer people form a community of resilience, they are students, teachers, Dalit, villagers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, journalists, executives, Brahmins, Christians, Sikhs, Muslims, etc. They are also dreamers and strugglers. The real challenge for *khus* education and creativity in India – and other postcolonial cultures – is to recognize a new composite queer identity that is neither uncritically Western nor simply an unimaginative regression to ancient or medieval erotic practices.

Insofar as queerness entails a displacement of heteronormative or otherwise hegemonic stratifications, a queer perspective constitutes an interrogation of the way in which all – not only queer – individuals are constructed as gendered bodies within a given social space.

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