

A close-up photograph of two people's hands clasped together. They are wearing light-colored, possibly linen, shirts. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with a clear blue sky and some greenery. The lighting is warm, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

SAME-SEX DESIRE IN INDIAN CULTURE

*Representations in Literature and Film,
1970-2015*

OLIVER ROSS



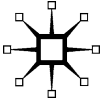
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Note on Translation

Whenever possible, languages other than English have been transcribed or transliterated using the Roman alphabet and placed beside their English translations. For ease of reading, diacritical marks have only been used for longer quotations in Hindi.

Introduction

In the Delhi I grew up in, everything happened. Married women fell in love with pubescent girls, boys climbed up sewage pipes to consort with their neighbors' wives, and students went down on their science teachers in the lab. But no one ever talked about it.

Babyji, Abha Dawesar¹

Set in 1980s New Delhi, Abha Dawesar's *Babyji* explores the sexual and romantic relationships between Anamika, the novel's adolescent protagonist, and three other women. Here, at the beginning of the narrative, this phenomenon of "married women" falling "in love with pubescent girls," a transgression that Dawesar implicitly ranks alongside extramarital and student–teacher sex, is not uncommon but merely unmentioned. Her location of these unspoken sexual practices in the past gestures wryly toward the altered attitudes that permitted a sexually explicit, "lesbian" work like *Babyji* to be published and disseminated in India: by 2005, the year of the novel's emergence, the same-sex relationships which "no one ever talked about" had entered public discussion. These ongoing sexuality debates, while demonstrating different degrees of tolerance or aversion, have partly been fueled by representations of "gays" and "lesbians"² in Indian literature and film, and the airing of numerous controversies has in turn facilitated the discursive proliferation of "homosexuality" across all Indian media. The present work argues that this trajectory, often carelessly read as "development" in the wake of Euro-American liberalism, is far more complex and uneven than it might first appear. The rights of men who love men and women who love women should not be conflated with "Western modernity," because open accounts of same-sex desire existed prior to India's incorporation into the British Empire, which imported both the psychosexual definition of homosexuality and virulent homophobia. In the contemporary era, gay and lesbian identities, themselves part of a multi-faceted Euro-American history

of sexuality, coexist and overlap with other formulations of same-sex desire in India, many of which survived the colonial era in changed and codified forms. The literary and cinematic representation of these interactions, increasingly common since the 1970s, lies at the center of this book.

The purpose of this enquiry is not only to add to the limited corpus of criticism on representations of same-sex desire in Indian literature and film, but also to address the lack of close analysis in existing studies; to cite Hoshang Merchant, much of this scholarship deals with “contexts, not . . . texts.”³ One potent example is the critical writing on Deepa Mehta’s “lesbian” film *Fire*,⁴ released in India in 1998. This incendiary work has occasioned numerous scholarly appraisals, such as those of Gita Patel and Jacqueline Levitin,⁵ both of whom subordinate its aesthetic value to its contextual significance as the catalyst of acrimonious national debates surrounding “lesbianism” in India. Similarly, critical responses to same-sex desire and its depiction in Indian literature and film have generally taken the form of contextualizing anthologies of essays, namely, in chronological order, *A Lotus of Another Color*, *Queering India*, *Sexual Sites: Seminal Attitudes*, *Because I Have a Voice*, *Sexualities*, and *The Phobic and the Erotic*.⁶ While invaluable introductions, these volumes privilege an all-embracing perspective over the close analysis of individual texts.

My intention is not to suggest that close analysis is superior to interpretive strategies that are principally historical or that use literature and film as exponents of metanarratives like queer theory and feminism. Yet an attentive reading of specific works suggests that they encapsulate the syncretic nature of Indian formulations of same-sex desire in a nuanced manner which has yet to be addressed in most literary and film criticism. This is not a triumphal assertion that close analysis is objective and other interpretive strategies partisan or obfuscatory. The former is an ideological practice which is indelibly marked by the subjectivity of the critic; to claim otherwise would be at best ingenuous, at worst mendacious. For a European or American to espouse close reading in the domain of Anglophone Indian literature is inevitably to inflict a culture-centric bias, expressed through a continuation of the Greek and Latin schools of rhetoric, grounded in later Anglo-American notions of practical criticism. But Indians writing in English have usually partaken of an education rooted in Euro-American literary traditions. All the Anglophone writers in this study, apart from Kamala Das, received some schooling in the United Kingdom or the United States of America: Vikram Seth was educated at Oxford and Stanford,

where he abandoned economics for prosody; Neel Mukherjee studied at Oxford, Cambridge, and the University of East Anglia; and Raj Rao conducted postgraduate work at Warwick, later attending the International Writing School of the University of Iowa. It is not too outlandish, then, to interpret their work by means of close reading. Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted note that “Many forms of what is sometimes called ‘rhetorical criticism’ treat interpretive issues without considering the ways texts engage with complex audiences . . . or practical contemporary issues . . . without relating those matters to specific times and places,”⁷ and close analysis is most effective within a wider critical framework and sociopolitical context. At the same time, the present study is circumscribed by its emphasis on Anglophone Indian literature and its authorship by a white British male in the academy.

I also use verbal and visual close analysis to engage with the films that form the basis of Chapters 1 and 5, although they are linguistically more heterogeneous than the literature. While Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* and Amol Palekar’s *Quest* were both made in English, Ligy Pullappally’s *Sancharram (The Journey)* is in Malayalam, and Onir’s *My Brother Nikhil* and Sridhar Ranganayn’s *68 Pages*⁸ use an amalgam of English and Hindi, popularly known as Hinglish. Such juxtapositions underscore the need for sensitivity to the representational tendencies of the languages in question. Sita’s (Nandita Das) remark to Radha (Shabana Azmi) in Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*, “There’s no word in our language to describe what we are,” throws down the scholarly gauntlet and demands investigation into the terminology used in the Indian languages other than English to describe female–female lovers, which will shortly be enunciated in detail. As a riposte to Sita’s dichotomous logic, which tacitly pits India and “our language” against the Anglophone “West,” this study focuses on the syncretism of same-sex desiring practices and identities in literature and film. My contention is that a close analysis vigilant to sexual syncretism and its origins may bring us closer to an appreciation of the complexity of same-sex desire in India, and that this hermeneutical strategy is more appropriate than certain renditions of Euro-American queer theory. At the same time, one must bear in mind the production of queer theory within Asia itself, which disallows its blanket dismissal as peripheral or neocolonial.

Gayatri Gopinath’s focus in *Impossible Desires*⁹ is the queer South Asian diaspora, her account of which is timely and indispensable, but her tendency to celebrate the imponderability of “indigenous” identities and practices of same-sex desire in India is troubling. Reading Ismat Chughtai’s “*Libaf*” (“The Quilt”) in tandem with Deepa

Mehta's *Fire*, Gopinath avers that the latter "refuses to subscribe to the notion that the proper manifestation of same-sex eroticism is within a politics of visibility and identity."¹⁰ This evaluation comes uncomfortably close to mimicking the invisibilizing rhetoric of *Fire* itself. As illustrated by Sita's remark, the film largely rejects the capacity of Indian institutions to elaborate or even name "local" identities of female–female desire, while simultaneously refusing to use the label "lesbian." Gopinath's admiration for the political inscrutability of Sita and Radha's relationship is at odds with her overall argument, which laments the unthinkability of the queer female subject in South Asia. There are moments where *Impossible Desires* reconstitutes this subject as an immature citizen, waiting to be queered by her radicalized diasporic counterpart, lacking the ability to politicize female–female desire on her own. Part of my aim is to disrupt this latent opposition, shifting the lens away from queer diaspora and analyzing representations of same-sex desire in modern India. Given the syncretic qualities of Indian narratives and embodiments of identity, it is important to view the binary of "indigenous" versus "foreign" as increasingly untenable within the imbrications of transnationalism and globalization, and thus demanding circumspection. Before delineating the purchase of syncretism and its applicability in the context of Indian sexualities, it will be necessary to establish a theoretical framework pertaining to "homosexuality."

Biological Essentialism, Social Constructionism, and Global Queerness

My methodology is informed by the debate between social constructionism and biological essentialism in sexuality studies, which reached a zenith in the 1980s and 1990s. John De Cecco and John Elia define the opposing positions as follows:

Biological essentialism depicts a process in which biological influences precede cultural influences and set predetermined limits to the effects of culture. In effect, it submerges sexual preference, a human process, into sexual orientation, a biological mechanism. Social constructionism tends to depict the individual as an empty organism that is filled and shaped by culture and society and is devoid of consciousness and intention.¹¹

Social constructionism in sexuality studies is usually said to have begun with the work of Michel Foucault, who posited in the late 1970s that homosexuality and heterosexuality are not natural and innate

sexual orientations but rather discursive inventions of the nineteenth century.¹² For example, Richard von Krafft-Ebing's 1886 forensic treatise, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, was among the earliest works to demarcate a schema of heterosexuality, bisexuality, and homosexuality, alongside a litany of sexual perversions. One of the major precursors of queer theory, which did not emerge as a term until 1990, Foucault influenced the social constructionist *Weltanschauung* of commentators like Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Warner, and David Halperin. As Halperin argued in 1989, "Unlike sex, sexuality is a cultural production: it represents the appropriation of the human body and of its physiological capacities by an ideological discourse. Sexuality is not a somatic fact; it is a cultural effect."¹³ Halperin's statement was made over twenty years ago, and present-day queer theory rarely articulates the biological essentialist/social constructionist debate in these terms, instead adopting, in the words of W. C. Harris, "the now commonsense conviction that essentialisms are always bad."¹⁴ As a radical investigation into the putative constructedness of sex, gender, and sexuality, queer theory, as distinct from the more heterogeneous queer studies, is predicated on antiessentialism. Were it to reify identity, it would be succumbing to the normative forces that it endeavors to resist. In opposition, political and public perceptions of sexuality are heavily influenced by scientific formulations of sexual orientation as a biological given, although the question of "nature or nurture," a popular variant of the essentialist/constructionist debate, remains polemical and unanswerable.

Rather than imposing biological essentialist or social constructionist preconceptions, my approach involves examining how the works that form the basis of this study suggest that sexuality is intrinsic and absolute or that it is produced by history and society. In the literature and film in question, "homosexual," "gay," and "lesbian" are often treated as essential identities which are universal and ineluctable, but such a position is frequently aligned with the "West." This is not necessarily indicative of the time-honored absence of essentialist terminology in India to denote what many see as the biological singularity of men who desire men and women who desire women, but rather of the obscuring of this taxonomy by Euro-American medical/psychological discourse. It often appears that there is no "indigenous" term capable of essentializing sexuality, and local formulations of same-sex desire emerge as an indeterminate set of practices, thereby corroborating the arguments of social constructionism. As will shortly be discussed, however, there is a plethora of precedents and models, and a plurality of traditions, which

could be invoked when theorizing same-sex desire in India today. Ironically, social constructionists frequently cite the supposed lack of a nomenclature of sexual orientation in parts of “the Global South,” but the affirmation that the “West” invented this concept and coined the uniquely essentialist identitarian signifier of “homosexuality” is neocolonialist. Such condescension ignores the extent to which Euro-American sexualities were influenced by formations from outside this region, as well as the eclipsing of analogous taxonomies by the global spread of the British empire and its attitudes of Victorian Puritanism; the psychosexual configuration of homosexuality displaced, not fully but partially, many preexisting models on the subcontinent.

There also exists a disparity between those who deploy queer theory in the Indian context unreservedly, those who use it with hesitance, and those who avoid it altogether. Gopinath’s remarks in *Impossible Desires* emblemize the former attitude:

What emerges within this alternative cartography are subjects, communities, and practices that bear little resemblance to the universalized “gay” identity imagined within a Eurocentric gay imaginary.

Queer sexualities as articulated by the texts I consider here reference familiar tropes and signifiers of Euro-American homosexuality—such as the coming-out narrative and its attendant markers of secrecy and disclosure, as well as gender inversion and cross-dressing—while investing them with radically different and distinct significations. It is through a particular engagement with South Asian public culture, and popular culture in particular, that this defamiliarization of conventional markers of homosexuality takes place, and that alternative strategies through which to signify non-heteronormative desire are subsequently produced. These alternative strategies suggest a mode of reading and “seeing” same-sex eroticism that challenges modern epistemologies of visibility, revelation, and sexual subjectivity.¹⁵

Gopinath dismisses the proponents of transnational gay identity as irremediably Eurocentric, whereas the practitioner of queer theory apparently has a complex and sensitive appreciation of South Asian expressions of same-sex eroticism, without subjecting them to the same distortions and reductions, and the possibility that queer theory itself might be underpinned by universalism remains unacknowledged. In Gopinath’s project there emerges the contradictory impulse to celebrate Indian resistance to vociferous sexual politics *and* to imply that these salutary politics can only be realized by means of the queer theory which emerges from Euro-American academia. Automatically

describing “non-heteronormative”¹⁶ desire in South Asia as “queer,” even as a heuristic, often comes at the expense of other descriptors of sexual self-expression. More broadly, if queer theory is applied to the “Global South” in unexamined ways, its drive to politicize the putatively apolitical sexual subject mimics the neocolonial aspects of gay internationalism.

Hoshang Merchant’s aggressive reaction to “Western” theorizations of “India’s gays” provides a stark contrast, representing as it does the objections of a widespread contingent:

I simply said western theory was not relevant in India. I do not theorise first and then live. I live my life as an Indian gay in India, write about it and then leave it to NRIs in the West to theorise about gay lives in India.¹⁷

Merchant’s vision is exaggeratedly dichotomous, but he provides a useful starting point for interrogating the mores that have led to the increasingly globalized reach and remit of queer theory. One of the paradoxes at the heart of most queer theory is manifest: if it considers itself a sustained critique of essentialism, it cannot escape the institutional measures that essentialize it as a discipline. The term “queer theory” connotes marketability, while academic conferences and curricula around the world sell themselves as “queer,” which is all too often recast as an up-to-the-minute “buzzword,” so that the nonnormative is forever folded back into normativity via free market capitalism and the conceptual need for disciplinary demarcation. If Teresa de Lauretis was the first to use the denotation “queer theory” in 1990, she dissociated herself from it soon afterward, remarking, “As for ‘queer theory’, my insistent specification lesbian may well be taken as a taking of distance from what, since I proposed it as a working hypothesis for lesbian and gay studies in this very journal [differences, 3.2], has very quickly become a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry.”¹⁸ De Lauretis’ critique seems extreme, but she does usefully limn some of the elisions on which queer theory as a discipline depends.

Since the early 2000s, queer theory, like feminist theory before it, has acknowledged its implicit positioning of the white subject, usually gay, lesbian, transvestite, or transgender, at the foundation of its critique of society. The year 2005 saw the publication of *What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?*, which prescribes the diversification of the theoretical branch of queer studies into a more multivocal, multiracial critique, with a greater focus on diaspora and globalization. At various junctures in this collection, the ethical imperative of multiracial

representation is subordinated to a concern for the disciplinary future of queer theory, which is said to be dependent on greater inclusiveness. The *Perverse Modernities* monographs engage in similar projects, recuperating the voices of previously silent African Americans, Latinos, Filipinos, Indians, and Native Americans, to name but a few. To echo Sanjay Srivastava, who suggests that many works of sexual anthropology have an “‘improving-the-West’ perspective,”¹⁹ there is something unnerving in the attempt to consolidate a Euro-American theoretical methodology by underlining its ability to assimilate ethnicities and nationalities on a global scale. India, too, has been the object of such self-reflexive analysis; for example, Gayatri Reddy notes that most existing studies of *hijras* (“eunuchs” or “transgenders”—see below) use the existence of a “third gender” in India to displace Euro-American narratives of dimorphic gender and sexuality, while simultaneously demonstrating condescending solicitude toward the subalternized *hijra*.²⁰

Returning to queer theory, the newfound concern with the intersections of nonheteronormativity, race, and diaspora is counterintuitive in light of the assertion that “queer” has “no fixed political referent”:

That queerness remains open to a continuing critique of its exclusionary operations has always been one of the field’s key theoretical and political promises. What might be called the “subjectless” critique of queer studies disallows any positioning of a proper subject of or object for the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent. Such an understanding orients queer epistemology, despite the historical necessities of “strategic essentialism” (Gayatri Spivak’s famous term), as a continuous deconstruction of the tenets of positivism at the heart of identity politics.²¹

With “strategic essentialism” consigned to history, queerness appears reduced to a free-floating signifier of difference; seemingly divorced from nonheteronormativity, it is reinvested with the ubiquitous applicability it possessed before acquiring “gay” and “gender-deviant” connotations, and before it was imbued with affirmative political significance. The intention behind such expressions of detachment is clearly to redress and reorient the discipline’s exclusions in the past, as well as to reaffirm queer theory’s relationship to deconstructionism. Yet the apparent interchangeability of these theories is misleading, given that deconstructionism has the potential to fully dismantle its subjects and objects, while queer theory uses a deconstructionist methodology but paradoxically maintains specific objects of enquiry for disciplinary coherence. In this sense, in their professed disaggregation of queer

theory from nonheteronormativity, many queer theorists are paving the way for the implosion of the field. While such a result is perhaps inevitable in any deconstructionist project, there prevail, as I have noted, vested interests in scholarly survival, most of which are grounded in thinly veiled capitalist concerns. The limiting scope of analyzing nonheteronormativity must be retained in the interests of capital, which in turn requires the exponential globalization of the discipline into regions like India, even as it is disclaimed in the name of deconstructionism.

The expansion of queerness into an untethered signifier may also devalue the historical and material struggle out of which queer self-identifications emerged; as Lisa Duggan argued in 1992, “There is a tendency among queer theorists to engage in academic debates at a high level of intellectual sophistication, while erasing the political activist roots of their theoretical insights and concerns.”²² The present-day usage of “queer” was partly determined in 1990 by the formation of Queer Nation, a New York-based organization whose goal was to draw attention to GLBTQ citizens and combat the prejudice they faced. The group’s reclamation of “queer,” which had (and still has) connotations of exclusion and abjection, especially as a disparaging signifier of nonnormative gender and sexuality, strategically inverted the defamatory rhetoric of homophobic movements.²³ In *Homos*, Leo Bersani considers how some iterations of antiessentialist “theory” have compromised such political interventions:

What’s troubling is that, in rejecting the essentializing identities derived from sexual preference, they mount a resistance to homophobia in which the agent of resistance has been erased: there is no longer any homosexual subject to oppose the homophobic subject. The desirable social transgressiveness of gayness—its aptitude for contesting oppressive structures—depends not on denying a gay identity, but rather on exploring the links between a specific sexuality, psychic mobility, and a potentially radical politics.²⁴

Many queer theorists would argue that these remarks, made almost twenty years ago, are outmoded; as Jasbir Puar observes, “Displacing queerness as an identity or modality that is visibly, audibly, legibly, or tangibly evident—the seemingly queer body in a ‘cultural freeze-frame’ of sorts—assemblages allows us to attune to movements, intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, and textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities.”²⁵ David Eng’s idealization of the “radical political aspirations of queer theory’s subjectless critique” and

his reiteration of “queer” as “a political metaphor without a fixed referent”²⁶ also augur the semantic emptying of the term, so it seems arbitrary that Eng and Puar’s monographs remain concerned with nonheteronormativity at all.

My own aversion to using the word “queer” as a metaphor without a fixed referent, divorced from GLBTI subjects, partly stems from an appreciation of its activist origins. Queer Nation, for instance, repeatedly used the slogan “Dykes and Fags Bash Back!” to protest homophobic violence. This is not to trivialize antiessentialist politics, after the fashion of those who “commonsensically” use “queer” as shorthand for gay or lesbian, but to affirm that they are built on a discursive elision. Initially, the semantic instability and polysemy of “queer” could be used to counter homophobia without submitting to the identitarian binary of pro-gay contra anti-gay, but the term was swiftly inflected by the unavoidably dichotomous logic of political resistance. However internally differentiated and self-reflexive this resistance is, it must represent itself as coherent and monolithic in order to combat the essentialism of public and state prejudice, to the extent that what may begin as strategic essentialism²⁷ inevitably metamorphoses into a more homogenizing sense of group identity. Deploying “queer” in exaggeratedly generalized ways, as in phrases like “queering the air” or “queering the Atlantic,” depends on continuously disowning or forgetting the historically indispensable binary thinking of early queer politics. Further, the rejection of essentialism has political implications for “sexual liberation” movements in India; if queerness and the “continuous deconstruction” of queer theory are conflated, there remains little room for maneuver in a nation where “homosexuality” is *de facto* criminalized. Perhaps denying Indians the benefits of claiming “queerness” as a concrete and specific identity which can be mobilized in the campaign for decriminalization is the most severe exclusionary measure of all. This is not to say that Indian subjects should claim “queerness” as an essential identity, but they should not be divested of that right. As W. C. Harris argues, “[In queer theory] essentialism became what institutions do to individuals, an imposing, policing mechanism. And it’s not that identities can’t be that. It’s just that their other characteristics—motility, agency—are being shortchanged.”²⁸ He pleads for a more generous and less divisive engagement with queerness which recognizes its potential for “both the queering of roles and identities and the perpetuation of such identities.”²⁹