

RISING QUEER HORIZONS AND INDIAN NATIONALISM



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Abstract:

This paper is intended at throwing more focus and scope for queer theory in the postcolonial Indian context. The colonial period particularly the introduction of Section 377 in the Indian Penal Code had a huge impact on the way sexualities has been understood and expressed in our nation.. Through an analysis of the movie Fire as well as through the response to the movie the paper is trying to demonstrate some of the integral fights in the path towards sexual freedom and how domestic violence is always normalized and often validated as necessary to maintain a good and moral family.

Keywords: *Section 377, Domestic violence, Hindutva politics, Fire, LGBT, Postcolonial India*

The twenty-first century saw many dramatic historical events and one of the most important and still ongoing one is the queer movement and the cultural ripples it causes in many nations and societies. In this paper, I am tracing the beginnings of modern gay identities in the postcolonial Indian society and the repercussion's it caused as well as the challenges it faces. The precolonial India was a state with much less, heteronormativity due to a lot of historical aspects as well as the absence of strong influx of Christian morals which made monogamous marriage the accepted norm. Many South Indian Brahmanical (upper caste Hindu) traditions never followed monogamy as well as the Muslims. As Foucault argues Homosexuality as an identity is a modern construct and this idea is aptly applicable here. The forces that oppose gay rights in India are mainly the religious structures and they lack a proper understanding of the Indian culture or traditions prior to British intervention. In the name of preserving and

protecting the culture and values of India, they are merely protecting the cultural changes that colonialism brought in into India as a means of civilizing the Indian population. My attempt in this paper is to bring out this aspect analyzing the reactions to the movie *Fire*. The modern gay movement in the west has significantly impacted and fueled similar movements in the developing world. Hence this is a movement that is rising up asking for legitimate representation as well as acceptance as minority using the western homosexual identity. The organizations that oppose these groups are the conservative religious fanatic groups that are denying certain minorities their rights by invoking a false sense of culture and history.

Post-colonialism is the intellectual reaction to the western theories that is obsessed with race and class. Representing the nations which were under the colonial occupations, postcolonial theories have always tried to enlist different parameters to analyze societal



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power structures that create oppression in the third world. Postcolonial studies thus developed in a context where the western theories proved adequate to understand the issues of postcolonial societies and hence offer unique solutions. The most important issue was that most western theories revolved around race and class. In the context of the third world, these two doesn't really apply. My focus in this paper is the Indian society, which is fundamentally caste ridden. A caste is a form of social stratification that is based on the jobs performed and the jobs are passed on generations. It is this caste structure that creates hierarchies of power and privilege. The influence colonialism had on this stratification and consequent oppression is also important. Thus the western theories on race and class do not offer much in the way of understanding these different social hierarchies and the power structures. Culture plays a crucial role here but the present rhetoric of culture is one modified by the colonial intervention and hence it doesn't really involve the ancient Indian cultural values. Analyzing queer movement hence involve a comprehensive understanding of a myriad of factors. My goal in the paper is to provide an overview of queer movement in India and the historic legacy, legal battles and analyze some factors that have contributed to this. Globalization has led to the consolidation of cultures across the globe. As Marx exclaimed the technological progress gets easily accepted but the cultural changes do not. This is very much visible in many developing countries post liberalization in the contemporary world. Citing family as the unit of preserving the culture and values the rights of many of these sexual minorities are denied and is seen as a bad influence from western culture while capitalism and its technological advancements are always hailed as great achievements of the human race worth implementing.

Modern Gay Identity

Modern gay identities and its spread towards becoming a global movement can be attributed to globalization. Two main theoretical standpoints on the gay identity is that of constructivists and essentialists. The essentialist argument is that homosexuality is not a new development but instead it has been there for centuries and the social constructivist drawing from Foucault posits that like heterosexuality homosexuality too is a social construction. Thus modern homosexuality has three main distinguishing features. Firstly, it distinguishes between sexual and gender transgression, secondly, there is an emphasis on emotional and sexual relationship and lastly development of public homosexual worlds (Howley page 26). Both constructivists, as well as the essentialist idea of sexuality, do not give a proper understanding when it comes to postcolonial societies. The rigid gender differentiation came to exist as a result of contact with western civilization. But there are some ancient texts which depict homosexuality. The issue here is that whether there was a sharp distinction between genders, and was homosexuality viewed in the same way as in modern societies is not clear. Thus there is no proper understanding or the foundations of on the history of sexuality in these societies. But considering the contemporary situation we can safely assume that the rise of gay movements is largely drawing its activism as well as history from the western movement and foundations of liberalism which advocate freedom of expression. Globalization and the transnational movements have contributed to this largely. In many parts of India, the defense against gay rights is from religious fundamentalist groups arguing that it is not part of Indian culture. These arguments definitely ignore the ancient cultural traditions and text and thus it is mainly the manifestation of colonial agenda that we see here. In many third world regions, the gender identities became rigid into the binary structure post involvement with the western incursions. Thus these forces against gay liberation are actually the



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invisible extension of colonialism and its Biopolitics.

Political economy of Homosexuality

Homosexuality has come to denote an important aspect of modernity. It has now become a value that is to be promoted for people and societies to attain the ideals of political liberalism. I am very skeptical of the sharp divisions of gender in societies and also of western and non-western sexualities. Also, any discussion of gender and sexual identities cannot happen in a vacuum, it should always be analyzed in the context of larger socio-political as well as economic context.

In most of the postcolonial societies, it is mostly the influence and a said progress towards democratic ideals which has its roots in liberal ideology that gay rights stem from. It is interesting to note here that it was these western nations which adopted a liberal democratic model at the same time denied these rights to the colonies. This said I want to introduce the idea of neoliberalism and its role in political economy which resisted the spread of homosexuality for its need for profit was always structured around the institution of family. Since western societies had changed and adapted to gay families these corporations had already adapted and started producing consumer goods to gay families as well. This cultural shift manifested in the form of different media programs which normalized gay relationships and hence played a large role in 'uncloseting' many sexual minorities in developing countries. Most gay rights activism is centered around the idea of legalizing gay marriage in India which results in the making of imitation of heterosexual families and thus targets to market the capitalist products. Post world war II and decolonization the white supremacy took a different turn in the form of neo-liberalism and prominence of neoliberal institutions. Although many western countries legalized gay rights very

recently when it comes to the third world it is often portrayed that the cultural backwardness of these countries is what is preventing the legal triumph for gay pride. It is here that the western hegemonic structure can be seen and the moral value of liberalism marketed. The third world population becomes the subjects to sell this promoting a culture of consumerism in a way finding more markets to the capitalist production. In fact, the newest aspect of neocolonialism fashions its invisible hands through constructing the identity of homosexuality.

History

Many ancient Indian texts mention nonheterosexual intercourse. Hence homosexuality is not something new in the Indian culture. Ancient texts as well as many temple carvings show that homosexuality could have been an acceptable practice. Later Arthashastra an ancient treatise on statecraft mentions small punishments for homosexual acts. It was under the British Raj or the colonial government that banned all homosexual acts under section 377 of Indian Penal Code which still exists to present day.

Although the law exists there have been fewer convictions under homosexuality. In 2009, in an epic case, the Delhi High court decriminalized gay sex and section 377 was removed. But it was reversed in 2013 when the supreme court ruled against this Delhi high court decision. Political parties like Congress, Aam Aadmi support gay rights but other parties do not. This lack of political unity is one reason slowing the momentum in bringing gay rights. There have been many instances where homosexuals are discriminated and moral policing subjected them to violence. In 2012 during a hearing the Supreme Court viewed that homosexuality should be viewed in the light of changing social structures across the world. In a separate incident, the Union home minister opined that "this is highly immoral and against social order".



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First gay pride march happened in 2008 in the cities of Delhi, Calcutta, and Bangalore. Thus most of the activism is mainly centered in the big cities, the main areas of globalization and dissipation of ideas. Thus it is mainly the urban elite which is powering these movements. Apart from the major cities, no other areas have a strong advocacy movement for the gay rights. These groups thus represent a minuscule population and in fact a minuscule gay/lesbian population. Same-sex marriage as of now is not legal and in many places same sex relations are shamed. Such situation once led to the suicide of a lesbian couple in the southern state of Kerala, since their families didn't approve of the relation.

Sexuality has been a subject silenced throughout history. As Michael Foucault in "*History of Sexuality*" concludes, talking about sexuality is the important feature of the modern century and a resistance to power structure's that silenced it. There are two important historical facts that brought sexuality and talking about it in the public arena in India. Firstly, the AIDS epidemic which made sex a topic to be discussed in public situations and secondly the media coverage due to liberalization policy of 1991 which widened tremendously television coverage and satellites and thus talking sex, became a common phenomenon. This could be the main reason why homosexuality was identified as part of the western culture by radical elements. Thus when movie *fire* was released the public had a good idea about the western notions of homosexuality and the radical elements in Indian culture were quick to call it anti-national.

Homo-sexuality in Exemplifying FIRE

Deepa Mehta, a Canadian- Indian directed this movie starring a prominent actor Shabana Azmi and a debutant Nandita Das. As both their husbands are indifferent to them, they finally share their miseries and fall in love. Azmi plays the role of a devout wife, Radha who until meeting Sita

(Nanditha Das) obediently manages the joint family. Sita is more of a free spirited person and has many rebellious remarks against the customs and traditions that often do not give women any choice. Immediately after reaching her husband's home the marriage Sita wears her husband's pants and imitates smoking which many youngsters in India considers to be cool and liberating. The film shows the expected role of a wife, many times Radha has to help her husband get over his desire by lying next to him. Since Radha can't conceive he considers sex to be redundant in their life, as the religious ascetic he is devoted to has preached that sex is only for procreation. Also, women are considered to be passive humans and should not possess desires. The only expectation from them is to be a dutiful wife. Sita's husband is in love with another girl who he thinks is modern and beautiful while he thinks Sita doesn't possess both qualities. Both these women are not desired by their husbands.

The movie shows the cultural and customary duties of what is expected from a wife, a view that is prevalent across the country. In this context *Fire* has two implications, firstly it disrupted the traditional family structure. When both Radha and Sita indulged in intimacy and later when they decided to leave. This also was a threat to the heterosexuality that is often seen as the natural order of relations. Secondly, it showed that women can have desires and their bodies although bound by traditional customs can break free. Unlike many women who suppress their desires Mehta's story unraveled a new identity for women hood and along with it the idea that these cultural norms are imaginary and changeable.

One of the most prominent gay protests came in response to the movie *fire*. The movie was based on a joint Indian family where two sister-in-law's fall in love. This revolutionary theme set in 1990 middle-class Delhi household was considered an unnatural theme by many right-wing political parties and hence led to nationwide protests



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and violence. Many theaters were vandalized and RSS, a right wing party proclaimed that homosexuality is not part of Indian Culture. To make sure to brand *Fire* as an abomination many of these parties resorted to old fashioned 'goonda' violence. The sequels to fire, the *earth* and *water* also met similar fate. There are two aspects of this protest against the movie one is the fight against globalization and secondly what Indian women should be and how they should behave.

Globalization is very much associated with neo-liberalism and its trade and commerce strategies. Although trade and commerce have been happening all throughout history it is the technological and media revolution that marks the present globalization different. Thus globalization is a process that is happening from the technologically superior west to the not so advanced developing world. In most of these developing countries all technological and economic advancement according to the western lines is favored but not cultural change. And women's bodies have been a territory where violent resistance against this cultural change has happened. Women celebrating Valentine's day or going to pubs have faced serious physical violence by the right wing political parties. Women's bodies transfers to the embodiment of culture in this Hindutva politics and such violence is tolerated in the name of protecting culture. Some assumptions made by the protagonists of this violence is women in India is defined as the 'Hindu women' neglecting the fact that there are many Christian, Jew, Muslim and even a large number of different ethnicities and tribal women in the country. This narrow view is then conditioned by the idea that women should be devoted loyal subjects to their husbands. Thus women who choose to be independent and decide their lives become a threat to the so defined Indian culture. As a country that was under colonial rule for centuries, this violent reaction to globalization and western culture can be to an extend a defense against any form of

future colonial power. But this rhetoric is blinded by the fact that they are using a narrow idea of Indian society and culture. Also, this neo right wing agenda is against human rights as well as against democratic liberal ideals.

Sudha Chauri of 'Mahila Aghadi' the right wing organization which launched the first fight against the movie explained the act saying that "The film is against the very structure of our society, this behavior is totally unnatural and bad." Meena Kulkarni of the Shiv Sena agreed to this, adding that "Azmi (the actor in *Fire*) has insulted Indian women...even if such things go on the sly, by showing them on the screen we are actually informing others about such acts of perversion. If women's physical needs get fulfilled through lesbian acts, the institution of marriage will collapse, and reproduction of human beings will stop". Uma Bharati, a member of the BJP (another right wing Hindu fundamentalist party) Government, accused Deepa Mehta of 'pervert thinking' and denied that lesbianism existed in India.

The women in *Fire* showed the important revolution of walking away from Family. A plot where traditionally violence against women has been happening such as Sati, child marriage, dowry etc. These characters of Sita and Radha defied all these and went to the extent of leaving their families. This was the second most important contestation Hindu groups had with the movie. From the subtle and devoted wives that they should be, they decided to break the family ties and their marriage and hence leave their husbands for the sake of their love. The movie broke the traditional family which is the basic foundation in the Hindutva definition of Indian culture and posed the threat of ideal Indian women.

The next criticism towards the movie was that of the problem of representation. Madhu Kishawar, the editor of a progressive women's magazine *Manushi* argued that Canada based Deepa Mehta being an



outsider is not capable of representing Indian women. According to Kishawar, if anything Fire only increases the western stereotypical notions of Indian women and thus a failure to portray the real Indian women. This is not entirely true as in the light of human rights and obviously the question of choice the story aptly brings out the way women are treated in a joint family. When culture and traditions become enforced it is not arguable that in such societies women are liberated and enforce their choices. The film also brings out some complex issues facing the queer movement, for example, Sita remarks that there is no word in our language to denote our relation.

One issue with the movie is that it shows the relation between Radha and Sita as an imitation of heterosexual relation. I am noting two scenes here first when they both dance together, Radha dress up in the traditional Saree and Sita in her husband's Shirts and Pants. Secondly, where Radha gives Sita mint and says that Brides are supposed to have a fresh breath, indicating marriage as a subtle reference to their relation.

Mehta brings in the erotic homosexual images through otherwise homosocial activities like oiling the hair, messaging feet etc. Many of these female bonding plots were largely absent from Indian cinema before. Also to the unsuspecting audience of their husbands see these acts as normal and they consider them to be fortunate to have such a good family. These images of otherwise considered innocent acts portrayed in an erotic way also disrupt the family structure and the established forms of relations in the family. The Fire was the first movie to portray homosexuality in the domestic setting and since then many movies followed such as Dostana where a gay couple kissing was portrayed on screen and the Censor board or any organization didn't organize a protest. Fire, in turn, created a coming out process for the film industry and

also to an extent made homosexuality an acceptable plot in movies.

Spivak's question of "Can the subaltern speak?" is to a large extent answered in this movie. By placing the female characters in the subaltern setting and eventually turning the story to them taking hold of their bodies and desires points to the fact that the subaltern can speak. "In addition, Nair and Mehta's female characters are constructed as Indian women with agency and not simply as ideological constructs of nationalism" (Moodley page 68). Indian nationalism has always revolved around the idea of purity of its women as chaste and obedient and ascribing these values to the motherland. These values later take the form of the obedient wife whose only role is to produce sons for the valor of the nation. It is the cultural enforcement of this idea that is the main discriminating force in many Indian societies that prevents women from owning their bodies or become bodies with desire. "Anything that threatens this image of Indian women is a betrayal of culture, god, nation, family and the moral structure" (Bhattacharjee page 172).

Breaking these stereotypes is the most emotional part of the movie. A strong Sita walks away from the house and a conflicted Radha is reluctant to leave at first as she decides to talk to her husband before leaving. But she changes her mind by reclaiming her body and sexuality which was earlier bound by customs and traditional norms. Culture and traditions when it becomes something enforced upon, women's bodies become subjects where oppression is instilled. The film provided a plot to break away and decide your destiny. From the place of oppression and subjugation, these bodies transform to sites of resistance and later into liberated forms. Unlike the western view of third world women as oppressed and dependent, these women show a different identity and is willing to leave their husbands and make a living of their own. Hence the movie successfully breaks the western



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stereotype of third world women too. Also, these movies created a space for resistance against colonial and nationalistic construction of Indian women and paved a way of redefining the Indian women, identity as well as their desire.

Nationalism and queer identities

The present Hindu rhetoric of nationality excludes many rights to women, transgender, gay and lesbian communities. Along the process of anti-colonial freedom movement developed the Hindu patriotic groups and the partition of India and Pakistan created a hard religious divide in the society which has its origins in the colonial government. Divide and rule based on religious differences were a strategic policy the British implemented to keep the Indian uprising in check. The cultural hegemony that Christianity had during colonization era influenced Indian society. The indigenous Christian communities were converted forcefully to Catholics under Portuguese, Dutch and later British rule. The missionaries that came along characterized Indian culture as Barbaric and hence a Christianization of the society underwent. "The flawed promises of nationalism as an all-inclusive, horizontal community are especially visible from the positions of women and marginalized groups" (Puri, page 137). Considering the fact that Transgender was identified as the third gender only in 2014 and the legal provisions for their wellbeing are still in development mode along with the lack of gay rights the state definitely does not consider these groups as real citizens as heterosexual people. States are, in other words, "powerful sites" of symbolic and cultural production rather than simply bureaucratic apparatuses that are natural or linear structures with power and authority flowing upward (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). Hence during the formation of state identity during freedom struggle the citizenship mainly went to the heterosexual population as organized under the British rule and the rest of the population was left behind. The

consolidation of Indian population into male and female categories came under the colonial rule. The same model was adopted post-independence. Being a Hindu majority state the Hindu ideals took a precedent over others. To understand more about the particular brand of Hindu nationalism that is propagated now, it has its origins in the freedom struggle and was cultivated as hatred for the colonial empire, of Muslims and other non-Hindu identities and adopted the colonial Christian moral values of family and sexuality. All Hindu right-wing activists see the queer movement as a moral decay and erosion of Indian culture and aping the western particularly US culture and participating in the cultural imperialism of the west. With the liberalization of 1990s the family became the crucial site where aspirations and apprehensions unleashed by the forces of globalization were negotiated (Ghosh in handbook of gender. Page 429).

The family is the center of all these debates and the main goal is to preserve the stereotype of north Indian Hindu joint family system which is often equated as the symbol of Indian cultural values and traditions. Numerous movies and television soaps that were released during the liberalization era clearly shows the anxieties that were faced and the feeling that joint family system will soon disintegrate into nuclear families. Obedience to elders or the head of the family who is normally a male member is the norm that gives you blessings from gods to a long prosperous life. Dissidents from this way of living are always portrayed as falling into trouble and later repent and the families welcome the changed and transformed person into their lives. Thus globalization set in motion a lot of cultural anxieties in motion although everyone welcomed the economic gains wholeheartedly. Changing lifestyles, as well as the changing romantic relationships took the control over desire and relationships from families to individuals. This is the biggest struggle that manifests in the form of right-wing political actions to preserve the



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culture of India and its great heritage. There have been subtle media portrayals of homosexuality but most of it took the form of confused friendship or cross-dressing. There are many female characters who loves dressing like men and eventually when they come of marriageable age they often transform to the stereotype of Indian women, emphasizing the importance of following the cultural and moral values and preparing yourself for the blissful married life. Thus the queer movement requires building more on the historical aspects of sexuality and its evolution in India to counter the anti-imperial sentiments that is unleashed against rights of queer movement.

Conclusion

Quoting Neville Hoad "In the moment of writing, the emergence of an international public sphere dedicated to finding and making "homosexuals" in parts of the world that have not seen public articulations of such persons may further allow "homosexuality" to be seen as an ongoing imperial project." This statement is particularly apt in the Indian context. The rise of transnational gay rights movement has made one category of othering possible through the use of homosexuality. A strategy to mark national and cultural differences in the population. Such a standpoint fails to recognize the regimes of power and intimate systems of regulation that promote heterosexuality as a political-economic necessity, not only subjugating women in the process but also obliterating socially legitimate space for sexual alterity. The choice is not really the problem, and as such, feminist and lesbian causes are intimately symbiotic, meaning that lesbian subjects must be at the heart of responses to masculine domination (Menon, 2005). The current queer movement thus is multifaceted and is a response to oppressive family and control of sexuality and the institutions and structures that propagate this. It has self-liberation at its core. It is also a reaction to hegemonic power that caste system in Hindu

culture create sand which has created historic oppression over centuries. Many writers see the gay pride parade that happened recently as the cultural revolution that was long blooming. The rhetoric of anti-nationalism against gay rights is a misguided as well anti-democratic and legalizing gay rights is long due in Indian culture.

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