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Intersectionality and the Queer Experience: Exploring Caste, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Indian Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how queer lives in contemporary Indian fiction are shaped not by sexuality alone but by its entanglement with caste, class, gender, region, religion and language. Using intersectionality as its central analytical lens, the paper reads five texts by writers from different linguistic and social locations: R. Raj Rao's *Lady Lolita's Lover* (2015), Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2014), Vasudhendra's *Mohanaswamy* (Kannada 2013; English translation 2016), A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010), and Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue* (Marathi 2006; English translation 2013). The study follows a qualitative method of close textual reading, supported by theory drawn from Black feminist thought, queer theory, Dalit feminist scholarship and Indian studies of sexuality. It argues that the queer subject in these narratives is never a single, universal figure. A metropolitan gay man, a small-town Kannada-speaking software engineer, a hijra from rural Tamil Nadu, an Adivasi woman in Jharkhand and a middle-class Marathi youth meet the same heteronormative order from very different positions of power and vulnerability. Caste decides who is visible and whose desire is policed; class decides who can afford privacy, migration and a chosen family; gender decides who is punished most harshly for deviation. The paper

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concludes that Indian queer fiction resists the Western coming-out narrative and instead offers a plural, located and politically charged map of desire, one that becomes fully legible only through an intersectional reading.

Introduction

The last three decades have seen a remarkable growth of queer writing in India. Novels, short stories, life narratives and translations from regional languages now speak openly about same-sex desire and gender variance, subjects that were long confined to coded references, silence or ridicule. This literary visibility developed alongside major legal and social changes. The Supreme Court recognised transgender persons as a "third gender" in 2014, and in 2018 it read down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a colonial law that had criminalised consensual same-sex relations for over a century and a half. Yet legal recognition has not produced a single, uniform queer experience. The freedoms promised by the courts reach an English-speaking, upper-caste, urban professional very differently from a hijra who survives through begging and sex work, or from an Adivasi woman whose body is watched by her village.

It is precisely this unevenness that the concept of intersectionality helps to explain. Coined in the context of Black women's experience of law in the United States, intersectionality holds that systems of power such as race, gender and class do not act separately; they overlap and produce forms of disadvantage that cannot be understood by looking at any one axis alone. In the Indian context, the most powerful of these overlapping systems is caste, which works together with class, gender, religion, region and language to decide who has access to space, privacy, education, mobility and dignity. A queer reading of Indian literature that ignores caste and class risks reproducing an elite, metropolitan image of "the Indian gay man" as the norm.

This paper therefore places five writers in conversation. R. Raj Rao, born in Mumbai in 1955, is one of the pioneers of Indian gay writing in English and a long-time academic activist at Pune. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, born in Ranchi in 1983, writes from and about the Santhal Adivasi world of Jharkhand. Vasudhendra, born in Sandur in the Bellary district of Karnataka, writes in Kannada and came out publicly through his fiction. A. Revathi, born in Namakkal district of Tamil Nadu in 1966, is a hijra activist whose life narrative is among the first such accounts published in English. Sachin Kundalkar, born in Pune in 1981, writes in Marathi and is also a filmmaker. Together, their texts cross English and regional languages, the metropolis and the small town, Hindu upper-caste households and Adivasi villages, the gay man and the hijra, as well as fiction and life writing.

The central question of this paper is simple: how do caste, class and gender shape the way queerness is lived, hidden, punished and narrated in these works? By reading the texts side by side, the paper aims to show that Indian queer literature is not one story of coming out but many stories of negotiation, compromise, violence, survival and community.

Literature review

Ambedkar (1936) argued that caste is not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers, sustained above all by endogamy. By identifying the control of marriage as the mechanism that reproduces caste, Ambedkar made sexuality and caste inseparable. Any desire that crosses caste lines or refuses marriage altogether threatens the system at its root.

Crenshaw (1989) introduced the term intersectionality to describe how Black women were failed by anti-discrimination law, which treated race and sex as separate categories. Crenshaw showed that single-axis thinking erases those who stand at the meeting point of multiple oppressions. The concept has since travelled widely and offers a method for analysing any subject positioned within overlapping hierarchies.

Butler (1990) argued that gender is not an inner essence but a performance repeated through acts, gestures and speech. This performativity sustains a heterosexual matrix that treats sex, gender and desire as naturally aligned. Bodies that break this alignment, such as effeminate men or gender-variant persons, expose the constructed nature of the norm and are punished for it.

Sedgwick (1990) described the closet as the defining structure of gay oppression in the twentieth century. Secrecy and disclosure, knowledge and ignorance, are organised around homosexual definition. Sedgwick also observed that coming out is never a single event, as every new social encounter demands a fresh decision about visibility.

Nanda (1990) offered one of the first detailed ethnographies of hijras in India. Nanda described the hijra community as a religious and social institution with its own rituals, devotion to the goddess Bahuchara Mata, and the practice of emasculation as a ritual rebirth. Nanda also recorded the poverty, stigma and sex work that shape everyday hijra life.

Rege (1998) argued for a Dalit feminist standpoint, criticising both mainstream feminism for ignoring caste and Dalit politics for ignoring gender. Rege insisted that Dalit women "talk differently" because their experience is shaped by the combined weight of caste and patriarchy. This standpoint is a direct Indian counterpart to intersectional thought.

Vanita and Kidwai (2000) compiled writings on same-sex love from ancient, medieval and modern Indian literature in several languages. Their work challenged the claim that homosexuality is a Western import and showed that Indian traditions contain many representations of same-sex affection, alongside periods of condemnation and silence.

Chakravarti (2003) examined how caste and gender are mutually constituted in India through what Chakravarti called Brahmanical patriarchy. Control over women's sexuality was shown to be central to maintaining caste purity. This analysis explains why gender and sexual deviance are policed most fiercely where caste boundaries are at stake.

Bhaskaran (2004) studied how economic liberalisation and globalisation reshaped sexual and gender identities in urban India. Bhaskaran showed that new consumer spaces gave some middle-class and elite queer people visibility, while the poor, the non-English-speaking and the gender-nonconforming remained marginal.

Gopinath (2005) theorised queer desire in South Asian public culture and diaspora as "impossible" within both nationalist and heteronormative frameworks. Gopinath argued that queer female desire, in particular, often survives within the home and homosocial spaces rather than through public coming out, which challenges Western models of liberation.

Kapur (2005) analysed how law in postcolonial India regulates sexuality through ideas of culture, morality and the nation. Kapur showed that sexual subalterns, including sex workers and queer persons, are constructed as threats to Indian culture, and that legal rights strategies can both empower and discipline such subjects.

Narrain and Bhan (2005) collected essays and testimonies documenting queer politics in India. They emphasised that queer struggles in India are tied to struggles over class, gender, caste and access to public space, and that the experiences of kothis, hijras and working-class men differ sharply from those of urban gay elites.

Reddy (2005) produced an ethnography of hijras and kothis in Hyderabad, focusing on the idea of *izzat* or respect. Reddy showed that hijra identity is structured by internal hierarchies of lineage, ritual status and sexual practice, and that class, religion and kinship shape how respect is earned or lost within the community.

Menon (2007) brought together key writings on sexuality in India and argued that sexuality must be read alongside caste, class and community rather than as an isolated domain. Menon's framing questioned the assumption that sexual identity is primary or stable across contexts.

Puar (2007) introduced the idea of homonationalism to describe how some forms of gay identity become acceptable to the nation-state, usually those that are white, middle-class and consumerist, while others are excluded. The concept warns that queer inclusion can produce new hierarchies.

Rao and Sarma (2009) gathered interviews with queer persons across India, giving space to voices from different classes, regions and gender identities. Their collection showed that the vocabulary and experience of queerness change with language, location and economic status.

Dasgupta (2017) examined digital queer cultures in India and observed that online platforms enlarge queer visibility mainly for urban, English-speaking and class-privileged users. Dasgupta pointed out that caste, language and access to technology continue to divide queer communities even in virtual spaces.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine how caste, class, gender and sexuality intersect in the representation of queer lives in selected contemporary Indian texts.
2. To analyse how region, language and translation shape the visibility and expression of queer desire.
3. To compare the experiences of differently located queer subjects: the urban gay man, the small-town gay man, the hijra, the Adivasi woman and the middle-class Marathi youth.
4. To assess whether Indian queer narratives follow or resist the Western model of the closet and coming out.
5. To identify the forms of community, kinship and resistance that queer characters build in response to marginalisation.

Methodology

The study is qualitative and interpretive. It uses close textual analysis of five primary texts: *Lady Lolita's Lover* by R. Raj Rao, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, *Mohanaswamy* by Vasudhendra (translated by Rashmi Terdal), *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi (translated by V. Geetha), and *Cobalt Blue* by Sachin Kundalkar (translated by Jerry Pinto). The texts were chosen to represent variety in language of origin (English, Kannada, Tamil, Marathi), genre

(novel, short stories, life narrative), region (Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand) and social position.

The analytical framework combines intersectionality theory, queer theory and Dalit feminist thought. Each text is read along five axes: caste, class, gender, sexuality, and space or region. Secondary sources, including critical studies, ethnographies and theoretical works, are used to support the interpretation. The findings of each reading are then compared in a summary matrix to bring out patterns and differences across texts.

Hypothesis of the study

Queer experience in contemporary Indian fiction is not determined by sexual orientation alone. It is significantly shaped by the character's caste, class, gender identity and regional location, so that the same heteronormative pressures produce markedly different outcomes for differently placed subjects. A further hypothesis is that regional-language and life-writing texts resist the individualist coming-out narrative more strongly than urban English texts.

Data analysis

R. Raj Rao: class, mobility and the city in *Lady Lolita's Lover*

R. Raj Rao has long placed class and caste at the centre of his queer fiction. His earlier novel *The Boyfriend* (2003) paired Yudi, an upper-caste, middle-class journalist, with Milind, a Dalit youth from a working-class background, and showed how a gay relationship in Bombay was shaped by unequal power. *Lady Lolita's Lover* continues this concern. Its protagonist, Sandesh, is a fifteen-year-old small-town boy who is tricked into stealing his father's savings and flees to Mumbai, where he survives by delivering DVDs. His affair with Lolita, a woman twice his age, ends in violence when her husband discovers it, and Sandesh is assaulted. The narrative later moves towards a same-sex relationship and follows its characters from Bombay to Goa and finally to Kodaikanal.

An intersectional reading shows that Sandesh's sexuality is inseparable from his class position. As a poor migrant with no family protection, his body is available for exploitation by those with money and status, whether straight or queer. The violence he suffers after the affair is a reminder that the poor pay most heavily for transgressing sexual norms. Rao also satirises urban activism through a debate on Section 377 within a group he names ARSE, the Association for the Rights of the Sexually Exploited. The satire suggests that metropolitan queer politics often speaks a language of rights that does not reach those, like

Sandesh, who live on the margins of the city. The novel's restless, fragmented and heavily allusive style, which borrows its title from Lawrence and Nabokov, can itself be read as a queering of the Indian novel in English, refusing the neat closure of a liberal coming-out story. In terms of Sedgwick (1990), Sandesh never fully enters or exits a closet; his sexuality is shaped by survival rather than by a choice between secrecy and disclosure.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar: the Adivasi woman's body in *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*

Shekhar's debut novel, which received the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar, is set among the Santhal community of Jharkhand. Rupi Baskey, a strong and capable woman, falls victim to a mysterious illness that wastes her body. The community attributes the illness to witchcraft and to the influence of Gurubari, a woman who had come close to Rupi. The novel is not a "gay novel" in the conventional sense, yet it is deeply queer in its handling of desire and the body. The intense, ambiguous bond between Rupi and Gurubari, and the fear and fascination with which the community regards it, point to a form of female intimacy that cannot be named within village norms and is therefore read as sorcery.

Here intersectionality works through indigeneity, gender and poverty. As an Adivasi woman, Rupi stands outside the caste Hindu order, but she is not outside patriarchy. Her body is watched, diagnosed and judged by the family and the village. The practice of branding women as witches, which continues to cause violence in parts of eastern India, functions in the novel as a tool for disciplining women whose desires or powers exceed accepted limits. Gopinath (2005) argues that queer female desire in South Asia often survives in homosocial and domestic spaces rather than through public declaration; Shekhar's novel shows how such desire, when it becomes visible, is quickly pathologised. The text also widens the scope of Indian queer literature beyond the urban, Hindu and English-speaking world by locating non-normative intimacy within Adivasi life, its oral traditions and its economic precarity.

Vasudhendra: region, language and loneliness in *Mohanaswamy*

Vasudhendra's *Mohanaswamy* is a collection of linked stories about a gay man who grows up in a small town in Karnataka and later works as a software engineer in Bangalore. The collection opens with Mohanaswamy grieving the loss of his long-time partner, Karthik, who leaves him to marry a woman. Later stories return to his childhood humiliation as an effeminate boy, his encounters with men in the city, and his deep personal devotion to Krishna. The book was significant beyond literature: its publication in Kannada in 2013 also marked the author's own coming out, and Vasudhendra has spoken of receiving calls from readers in villages and small towns who found themselves in the stories for the first time.

The intersectional significance of *Mohanaswamy* lies in language and region. Vasudhendra has observed that information about sexuality is largely available only in English, which excludes thousands of gay men growing up in rural and small-town India. Writing in Kannada therefore becomes a political act that challenges the class privilege of English. Mohanaswamy's middle-class professional status in Bangalore gives him some autonomy, yet his small-town origins and family expectations keep him lonely and fearful. The departure of Karthik into heterosexual marriage illustrates Ambedkar's (1936) insight that marriage is the institution through which caste and family order reproduce themselves; queer love is sacrificed to this order. Butler's (1990) idea of gender performance is visible in the stories of childhood, where Mohanaswamy is punished for failing to perform masculinity. Unlike the defiant urban activist, Mohanaswamy draws strength from religious faith, showing that queer survival in India may take forms that do not separate desire from devotion.

A. Revathi: caste, poverty and hijra kinship in *The Truth About Me*

Revathi's life narrative is the most direct account of the intersection of gender identity, poverty and social exclusion among the five texts. Born as Doraisamy in a village in Namakkal district, Revathi grew up feeling herself to be a woman and was beaten and humiliated by family and school for her femininity. She ran away to Delhi to join a hijra household, underwent the emasculation ritual known as *nirvaan*, and later lived in Mumbai and Bangalore, where she survived through begging and sex work and faced repeated violence from the police and clients. She eventually joined the NGO Sangama and became an activist.

The narrative shows that gender variance in India is lived within structures of class and community. Revathi's poverty and lack of education limited her options to the traditional hijra occupations, a pattern documented by Nanda (1990) and Reddy (2005). The hijra household offered a chosen family and a form of kinship through the guru-chela system, but it also had strict hierarchies, rules and economic demands. Reddy's (2005) concept of *izzat* helps explain how Revathi constantly negotiates respect within and outside the community. Kapur (2005) argues that the law constructs sex workers and gender-variant persons as threats to public morality; Revathi's encounters with the police confirm this. Her decision to write and publish her story turns a stigmatised life into testimony, and her later work as an activist makes the personal narrative a collective political claim. The text thus resists the Western coming-out model: Revathi's transformation is not only an individual disclosure but entry into a community with its own history and rituals.

Sachin Kundalkar: the middle-class home in *Cobalt Blue*

Cobalt Blue is narrated in two parts by a brother and sister, Tanay and Anuja, who live with their parents in a middle-class Marathi family in Pune. Both fall in love with the same man, an unnamed paying guest who rents a room in their house. The man has a sexual relationship with Tanay but later elopes with Anuja, only to abandon her. Tanay's section is a lyrical, interior monologue of longing and loss, while Anuja's section, written as a diary, reveals her own unconventional desires and her disappointment.

The novel reveals how middle-class respectability shapes queer silence. Tanay's love is never spoken in the family; it exists only inside his room and his mind. As Sedgwick (1990) suggests, the closet here is not a single wall but a web of unspoken knowledge: the family does not know, or chooses not to know. Gender also creates a sharp asymmetry. Anuja's elopement is a public scandal, and the family's reaction focuses on her honour, which fits Chakravarti's (2003) analysis that women's sexuality bears the burden of family and caste purity. Tanay's grief, by contrast, remains invisible because it cannot be named at all. The paying guest, rootless and free of family ties, represents a form of class and social mobility that allows him to take pleasure and leave without consequences. Translated from Marathi, the novel also shows that intimate, introspective queer writing has a long life in regional languages, not only in English.

Comparative summary

The table below summarises how each axis of identity operates in the five texts.

(Author)	Caste / community	Class	Gender	Region and language	Response to marginality
Lady Lolita's Lover (Rao)	Caste privilege of urban activists contrasted with outsiders	Poor small-town migrant exploited in the city	Young male body as commodity	Mumbai, Goa, Kodaikanal; English	Survival, drifting relationships, satire of activism
The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey (Shekhar)	Santhal Adivasi, outside the caste Hindu order	Rural, agrarian precarity	Female body policed through witchcraft beliefs	Jharkhand; English with Santhali world	Unnamed female intimacy read as sorcery
Mohanaswa	Hindu small-	Upwardly	Effeminacy	Karnataka;	Faith,

(Author)	Caste / community	Class	Gender	Region and language	Response to marginality
my (Vasudhendra)	town milieu; marriage as family duty	mobile software professional	punished in childhood	Kannada in translation	solitude, slow self-acceptance
The Truth About Me (Revathi)	Rural Tamil family; hijra community hierarchies	Extreme poverty, begging and sex work	Trans woman / hijra identity	Tamil Nadu, Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore; Tamil in translation	Chosen kinship, testimony, activism
Cobalt Blue (Kundalkar)	Respectable Marathi middle-class household	Secure middle class	Woman's honour versus man's invisible grief	Pune; Marathi in translation	Silence, interior longing, diary as voice

The comparison shows that the experience of queerness changes sharply with each axis. Where class privilege is present, as for Mohanaswamy and Tanay, the main suffering is silence and loneliness. Where poverty combines with gender variance, as for Revathi and Sandesh, the suffering is physical violence and economic exploitation. Where indigeneity and gender combine, as for Rupi, desire is not even granted a name and is read through the language of illness and witchcraft.

Conclusion and findings

The reading of these five texts supports the hypothesis that queer experience in contemporary Indian fiction cannot be separated from caste, class, gender and region. The principal findings are as follows.

First, class determines the form that queer suffering takes. Characters with economic security, such as Mohanaswamy and Tanay, experience queerness mainly as silence, loneliness and the loss of lovers to marriage. Characters without it, such as Revathi and Sandesh, experience it as hunger, violence, police harassment and sexual exploitation.

Second, caste and community operate through the control of marriage and the female body. The loss of Karthik to marriage in *Mohanaswamy*, the scandal of Anuja's elopement in *Cobalt Blue*, and the surveillance of Rupi's body in Shekhar's novel all show that the family and community enforce sexual norms in order to preserve their social order. This confirms the arguments of Ambedkar (1936) and Chakravarti (2003) that caste reproduces itself through the regulation of sexuality.

Third, gender intensifies punishment. Effeminate boys, hijras and women whose desires exceed norms face harsher discipline than masculine-presenting men. Revathi's life narrative is the clearest example, but the pattern runs through every text.

Fourth, language and region shape visibility. Writing in Kannada, Marathi and Tamil, or about Adivasi Jharkhand, brings queer experience to readers excluded from English-language discourse. Translation into English then carries these located experiences to a wider audience, though always with some loss of nuance.

Fifth, the texts largely resist the Western coming-out narrative. Instead of a single moment of disclosure leading to liberation, they offer negotiated visibility, chosen kinship, religious faith, testimony and quiet survival. In this sense they confirm Gopinath's (2005) argument that South Asian queer desire often takes forms that the liberal model of the closet cannot fully explain, and they caution, with Puar (2007) and Bhaskaran (2004), against treating the urban, English-speaking, middle-class gay man as the universal queer subject.

In conclusion, an intersectional approach is not an optional addition to Indian queer studies but its necessary foundation. The works of R. Raj Rao, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, Vasudhendra, A. Revathi and Sachin Kundalkar together form a plural archive in which the meaning of queerness changes with every shift in caste, class, gender and place. Future research could extend this framework to Dalit queer life writing, lesbian and trans-masculine narratives, and queer writing in other Indian languages, where the intersections of power are likely to be equally complex.

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