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**Homosexual Love and Homosexuality:
A Study of Hoshang Merchant's *The Man Who Would Be Queen*, *Alif/Alpha: Poems for Ashfaque*, *Juvenilia*, and
Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia.**

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the homosexual love and the various facets of the experiences of homosexual lovers as they have been represented by a plethora of Indian writers writing in English or in Vernacular. The paper attempts to argue that homosexual love is not a western import; it is not alien to India. Homosexual love has its echoes, explicit or incipient in Indian religious scriptures, paintings and literatures, ancient and modern. It is the conventional heterosexist ideology of the patriarchal society that has been able to successfully erase the very existence of same-sex love and its presence from the normal social discourse. Of many remarkable writings from the homosexual writers of India, the paper takes up some select writings of Hoshang Merchant who happens to be India's first openly gay poet whose creative writings and anthologies have come a long way to establish a homosexual literary genre which has always been unheard of prior to him. The paper discusses Merchant's autobiographical fiction *The Man Who Would Be Queen*, select poems from his collections entitled *Alif/ Alpha: Poems for Ashfaque*, *Juvenilia*, and an anthology of gay writing called *Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia*. The paper discusses how the homosexual writers in their writings are found to be engaged in a constant battle with their very own selves and the world outside, for the world around, either fails or pretends to have failed to understand and acknowledge the existence of the homosexual people.

Keywords: Homosexual love, homosexuality, patriarchy, homophobia, sexual binary, identity.

Homosexual love and its representations are not new in India. Homosexual love has its echoes, explicit or incipient in Indian religious scriptures, paintings and literatures, ancient and modern. Critics such as Ruth Vanita, Saleem Kidwai, who have written extensively on the history and traditions of same-sex love argue that “many believe that the idea and practice of same-sex love were imported into India by ‘foreigners’- Muslim invaders, European conquerors, or American capitalists” (Vanita and Kidwai 2008, xxxv) who did not approve of non-procreative sex. The situation was severely worsened when the British Government being influenced by the principles of Victorian Puritanism introduced a penal code that considered homosexual love a crime of severe punishment which continued to be part of the Indian Penal Code, (Section 377, Chapter XVI):

Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine. (Sec. 377, Ch.XVI)

The section was declared unconstitutional with respect to sex between consenting adults by the High Court of Delhi on 2 July 2009 which was a result of protests from different social organizations, homosexual rights activists and intellectuals across India and abroad (Vanita and Kidwai 2008, p. xx). But that judgement was overturned by the Supreme Court of India on 12 December 2013, with the Court holding that amending or repealing Section 377 should be a matter left to Parliament, not the judiciary. An unbiased excavation into the ancient and modern Indian cultures and traditions surely proves that same-sex love is not alien to India; it is not a foreign import (Vanita and Kidwai 2008, 4). But all the negative connotations and severities such as homophobia, criminalisation, and hatred that same sex love has happened to acquire over the years, are indeed the consequences of the process of internalisation of Victorian Puritan philosophy and world view handed down to the posterity by the British who wrote a new history for the Indians that best suited their need by initiating a process of complete erasure of Indian culture and traditions.

The advent of 'a new literature' by queer writers in India during 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century marks a 'new phase' in Indian Literature (Arroyo 2010, 111). The queer literary scene comes to be enriched with a host of prolific literary critics and creative writers such as Hoshang Merchant, Suniti Namjoshi, Ruth Vanita, Saleem Kidwai, R. Raj Rao, Ashwini Sukthankar, Eunice de Souza, Ashok Row Kavi, Firdaus Kanga, Kamaleswar and so on. The whole gamut of Indian Literature on same sex love also includes writers such as Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra and the likes, choosing homosexual subjects to write upon.

Of the writings that lay the foundations of Queer Literary genre in India, *Yaraana: Gay Writings from South Asia* (1999) edited by Hoshang Merchant, *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writings from India* (1999) edited by Ashwini Sukthankar, *Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History* (2008) edited by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, Ruth Vanita's *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West*, and Hoshang Merchant's *Forbidden Sex/Texts: New India's Gay Poets* (2009) deserve to be mentioned specifically since these writers have ventured out to break the silences, to point out to the self-willed neutrality and secrecy about homosexual people and their lives that a race has so tactfully managed to maintain over the years. These seminal works are indeed works of literature that attempt to speak about issues that concern homosexual people to reclaim an equal space into the mainstream.

This paper reads into the selected writings of the famous Indian gay writer, Hoshang Merchant to trace the emergence and development of gay literature in India that aims at creating a homosexual discourse in the modern academic and cultural realm in India. Hoshang Merchant considered India's first openly gay poet, has produced a plethora of creative writings that include numerous collections of poems, anthologies of gay writings and theorizations on homosexual love. His first gay anthology *Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia* has earned him critical acclaim. The publication occasions the emergence of gay literature in India. In his "Introduction" to the book, Merchant remarks that his interest in India's "homosexual literary history is more than personal" (1). The repressive and discriminatory mechanism of the

heterosexist patriarchy becomes evident when the poet is seen to acutely feel the absence of a single nominal word for nomenclature of a male homosexual entity inhabiting a dichotomized social space. He shows how a term like 'homosexual' which is European in origin cannot be transposed to designate an Indian gay because it is an umbrella term that encompasses both male and female indulging in same-sex love, whereas terms like "active/passive, top/bottom, panti/koti (husband/wife)" (Merchant 2009, 25) and others are derogatory and condescending since they happen to have acquired negative connotations. Thus a male homosexual is visible/invisible to the society; he occupies a physical space but happens to be literally non-existent in the society that contains and denies him. Hence, he belongs nowhere. Thus, a gay grows into a liminal identity, a decentred species that lives and grows up feeling alienated, because of his inability to be identified with the heterosexist construct of love and marriage that denies the existence of any other form of love outside its fixed binarised paradigm of opposite sexes – man/woman, male/female. Hence, a gay is an outsider.

The gay is engaged in a constant battle with his true self – the 'gay-self' since society does not recognize and acknowledge who he really is. A process of self-denial and suppression is initiated by the gay person to occupy a space in the mainstream society which every male homosexual has to do every day for fear of being exposed as abnormal and ugly. He fears to come to terms with his own self and always tries to run away from what he really is. This gives birth to a neurosis in the gay identity which very often develops into suicidal attempts.

But all gays do not passively submit to the precarious condition of their existence; there are some who fight back and try to secure a place either through social activism or by expressing and celebrating their 'being' through diverse forms of arts such as literature, painting, music and so on. Most of these artistic creations are intended not merely to evoke aesthetic pleasure in the mind, rather they are extremely political with artistic agenda, and are grounded on and impregnated with lived everyday reality of torture, humiliation, victimization of the homosexual people. Commenting on the literary

works anthologized by Merchant in *Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia* (1999), Ashok Banker asserts:

These are not pieces written out of literary ambition or to simply explore an appealing idea or concept; these are pieces that had to be written, that demanded to be created, that leaped up and caught their authors by the throats and said “write me” over and over again until it was done.
(Merchant 1999, Back cover)

Gay sexual literatures are mostly personal, subjective and autobiographical in nature owing to the predicament of the writers. Hoshang Merchant's *Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia*, anthologises creative pieces of works from different literary genres that raise the most relevant issues governing the world of the ordinary homosexuals and the homosexual writers, both of whom are decentred identities. Sometimes Merchant translates Sufi poems and ghazals into English and reads into the homoerotic elements that conventional readings have always overlooked designating it to be an expression of spiritual love and union devoid of any physicality. Firaq Gorakhpuri's poem “Public Meeting and Parting as Private Acts” (Gorakhpuri 1999, 1), rendered into English by Merchant expresses, passionate love and longing of a lover for his male lover. The poet implies “This coloured cloth hides a secret joy/ There's current playing under the shroud of the grass (5-6). The expressions like ‘secret joy’, ‘current’, ‘the shroud of grass’ are indeed highly provocative of the ‘unsanctioned’ joy and love.

In “Pages from Diary”, Bhupen Khakar, a painter-teacher by profession and a gay activist, speaks about a gay person's sexual encounters with complete strangers – the monotony, frailty, fear and mutual distrust between sex partners. Here in the story, Jitubhai picks up the narrator in the market and hurries through the busy road to his apartment to have sex with him. “Pages from Diary” presents a critique of the life of a gay homosexual who is always conscious of ‘a weariness, a monotony in the chain of such relationships’ (1). “O Pompinia Mine!” by Sultan Padamsee is a monologue of a lover struggling to put in words the claustrophobia and invisibility that

characterize their existence. The lovers live by lying about themselves and feigning what they are really not. Thus the lovers can never be what they are which furthers the process of self-alienation. And the lover seems to be quite used to this mode of living – the paradoxical and liminal existence which is why he self-mockingly tells his lover:

They shall never know,
This is the toxin that adds flavor to our life,
Never know
That you are not my mistress nor my wife. (22-25)

Another important piece of literature included in *Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia*, is “Night Queen”, a one act play by Mahesh Dattani which sheds light on the bleak and claustrophobic world of the Indian homosexuals. “Night Queen” undertakes a socio-psychological study of gay experience and gayness. It confidently addresses issues like self-hatred of gays, their social exclusion, homophobia, and so on. The story starts at night in a small room occupied by Raghu, a young boy in his mid-twenties. Ash comes to Raghu to have sex with him after their meeting in a park. Initially, both of them fake and conceal their identity which is common between strange gay partners during casual sex and meetings for their fear of being exposed and blackmailed. In the course of their cross conversation, Raghu discovers the real name of Ash which is Ashwini Kothari and his being gay. Raghu threatens Ashwini to disclose his real identity to his beloved Gayatri, Raghu’s sister and his mother who are totally in dark about his homosexual orientation.

In the play, the readers are made to confront the world of the two homosexuals who are battling with their own selves to deny and suppress their identity, and to annihilate their world of perpetual suffering, suffocation, dehumanization through a process of self-burial. The audience is made to see the stark realities of being gay. In the story the presence/absence of Ash’s brother who represents every homophobic person of the hetero-normative society, is part of the playwright’s self-conscious artistic device to point to the perpetual politicized neutral stance of the heterosexuals. To Ash’s brother,

homosexuals are lepers, non-humans. Ash says, “I saw myself in my brother’s eyes and I wanted to die” (Dattani 73).

One day when Ash slept with his brother and wanted him sexually, his brother beat him up severely and took him out the next evening to the park infested with homosexuals hungering for sex and waiting to pick up their prey – complete strangers for sex. To Ash this came as an epiphanic moment – a moment of self-realization of being non-existent to the world, for he was made to look at himself in the mirror – the lives of those ‘ugly’ creatures. He states, “They looked unhappy and miserable to me. And ugly. And I didn’t want to be part of that. I didn’t want to be so ugly and repulsive” (73). It instantly gave birth to a sense of self-negation and self-divide born out of his realization of being ugly and repulsive which he is actually not. Ash declares, “I hate myself” (73).

The dreadful vision of an invisible and loathsome existence is what compels Ash to fake a heterosexual person and to believe in the heterosexist monogamous marriage which actually never makes less gay of him. But the playwright shows the dangers that this intentional self-burial brings about in the life of both the pseudo-heterosexist and the straight wife which means jeopardizing his own life as well as others including his family. That is why Raghu warns Ash from jumping into another pitfall while trying to escape from one. For Ash, marrying Gayatri would make him less ugly, which means it would transform him into an acceptable and ‘normal’ creature of the society that considers everything outside of its heterosexist ideologies and normalizing institutions, ‘aberration.’ “Night Queen”, a short but magnificent play presents a critique of the Indian gay scenario and makes a formidable attempt to show the wretched plight of the homosexuals and establish their identity as god’s creation, not god’s curse.

The English translations of Hoshang Merchant of Urdu poems by Iftikhar Naseem entitled “An Answer to the Female Liberationists”, “Her/Man”, and “Nath of the Gay Prophet” are lucid, lyrical and political. “An answer to Female Liberationists” is a vitriolic satire against the so-called flawed and discriminatory female liberationist

movement policy of fighting patriarchy and its ideologies to bring about equality between man and woman by disrupting all binary oppositionalities in the male chauvinistic society. The poem is an attack against the hypocrisy of the female liberationists who feel it is judicious not to bring any other species other than man/woman within the purview of their movement of wellbeing. The LGBTs (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) do not come under consideration since they do not belong to the fixed binary of male/female. The poet questions if the fight is against patriarchy, why not speak for the homosexuals since in both cases of heterosexual females and homosexuals, the oppressor is the same – the patriarchy. The poet clearly points out “And the man who tormented you/ Was the man tormented me” (Merchant 1999, 216). Hence the strange silence is questioned.

In “Her/Man” Naseem erases homo/hetero binary, and claims that it is the same sex world that is characterised by completeness. The poet strongly believes:

Only a man can complete a man
Only a woman can complete a woman.
I am man/woman
I am complete within myself. (Naseem 1999, 218)

Nothing can be more easily said to undo the heterosexual discourse than this.

Despite his anthologies and theoretical works on male homosexual love, Hoshang Merchant has a vast collection of creative writings to his credit that speak of the daring tales of gay men in India. In an attempt to search for an answer to his own musing as to ‘why I write’, Hoshang Merchant, an openly gay poet, writes in his book *The Man Who Would Be Queen: Autobiographical Fictions*, “As everyone knows by now, I’m a homosexual. To write this sentence and to speak it publicly, which is a great liberation, is why I write” (154).

The Man Who Would Be Queen, mainly divided into four parts namely The Garden of Delight, Circle of Hell, Garden of Bliss, and I Am Not In, traces the troubled journey of a gay poet embarked on a

search for discovering and acknowledging his true self, his freedom and love. It is a confessional and realistic account of a gay poet about his life-struggles, his search for a home, a true lover and above all his growing into a poet whose mission is not to suppress and bury his identity by passively submitting to the destiny that society ordains for him, but to proclaim and establish his identity as a gay to secure an equal space, he has always been denied. Merchant's story of love, loss, lust, victimization and self-liberation does not follow a chronological time frame since, as the poet says, he has to heavily rely upon his memory, reminiscences, broken images and dreadful visions, nightmares of his own self that could never find an outlet for they are un-poetic and censored. The author declares, "And I go back into this mansion of memory with rooms within rooms" (156).

The poet engages himself in unearthing the dark secrets of his own life that had to be locked away for survival in the society. Now that the poet has undertaken an artistic task to unearth the secrets – his sexual fantasies, sexual encounters, his working as prostitute in gay brothel, his unreciprocated love both for males and females that he came across in his life, his being beaten almost to death for being gay, his coming to terms with his own gay identity, he cautiously treads and ransacks the lanes of his memories and picks up them as much as he can in their deformed, distorted and disheveled state which actually makes his writing follow a narrative that is not episodic and chronological in time and space, rather it appears more like a stream-of-consciousness narrative which sporadically turns out to be impressionistic and surrealistic, yet organic.

Lucid and lyrical *The Man Who Would Be Queen* speaks about the poet's childhood days, college education, family, his education in the USA where he actually came out of the closet as a gay, as revealed by himself in an interview, and he also stresses on his stays in the Middle East – Iran, Israel, Palestine and his coming back to India, a homophobic land that seems to be lenient towards the homosexuals compared to the Western and European countries where same-sex lovers are beaten up and even put to death.

Reading into the work *The Man Who Would Be Queen* from a universalistic and idealistic perspective would definitely kill the socio-political agenda of the poet which is to claim the world of the 'homosexuals', a nomenclature that the heterosexist patriarchy thrusts upon them to single out them as 'abnormal', 'queers', hence abominable and ugly. Quoting Anais Nin's 'Sex is a way to sainthood', the poet time and again goes back to the statement of Anais Nin which reinforces the necessity to approve of the true instincts of human being to love, and it is through love that sainthood is attained. The repetition of the statement by Merchant in the book may point out to his sublime attempt at freeing male homosexual love of all dirt and definitions and thereby canonize it.

Merchant's poems manifest an irresistible cry for freedom and love. Merchant sometimes turns to vitriolic satire to give vent to his deep-rooted anger against and distrust for mainstream society and to point out to the intentional and politicized pretention of self-ignorance of a whole race that still struggles to come to terms with its 'queer self.' The poet observes in the poem "Who is the Member of the Wedding?" as it occurs in the collection of poems entitled *Alif/Alpha: Poems for Ashfaq*:

A whole race with its hand in its pockets
A something an eye can't see but a whole race knows
And keeps to itself.... (18-20)

In this poem the poet attempts to express his sense of alienation from the rest of the world. The disturbed poetic self identifies itself with "...the stain that could spot the serge" (12). Here the poet's appearance in the wedding can metaphorically be read as his effort at being part of the heterosexual society asserting his gay identity which our social diktat and normalising institutions never approve of. The poet is well aware of the fact that our society has always contained homosexuals within its space, but it never accepts them for fear of being exposed to its age old politics of discrimination against and suppression of minor identities through inventing and disseminating a heterosexist ideology and world view. The poet's disbelief and scorn for marriage, the sacred

institution of patriarchy is expressed when he calls it 'stale matrimony' (12) in the last line of the poem.

The poem "Couplets written with blessings of Feisal Chisti, Nampally Dargah" reveals how the poet's hatred of his father, who for the poet is the male chauvinistic prototype inhabiting his physical and imaginative world of childhood days, led him to his rejection of the conventional heterosexist love which leads to nowhere but to breeding man power as the poet believes. The poet writes:

My hatred of my father led me to this Love
Of boys and men, saints and sinners. (L 2-3)

The poet realizes and acknowledges the absence of an appropriate register that he would speak in. Hence he radically resorts to his body to create words and expression to suit his artistic aim of formulating and translating gay experience in his creative works which is why he overtly celebrates male body and disrupts heterosexist linguistic constructs describing a gay's body sometimes in feminine terms:

Our hands feet eyes genitals are miracles
The act of love from genitals itself is a miracle. (L 17-18)

This is how the poet relies heavily on body images to communicate the incommunicable and the transcending power of his male love. The poet mocks the diktat of the "monolithic edifices" (p. 27) of the society of being an angel or a saint by denying the demands of our body. The poet asserts in "Notes: 'My Lover' (for Ashfaq)" that "Society builds monolithic edifices. Men are imprisoned in it. Women, also" (27). The poet points out to how the society very craftily taboos any overt sexual discourse. He says in the poem "for Ashfaq: Yesterday, An Angel":

...I had already left my body behind
In an attempt to become angelic. (6-7)

The poet desires to attain sainthood by embracing and celebrating his body – it surges and wants, not by rejecting them. But sometimes the poet is skeptic about the possibility of communication, in the true sense of the term, through words. The poet states in the poem "Notes: 'My

Lover' (for Ashfaq)" that "Words/ Words are the enemy" (12-13). Merchant believes in the liberating force and energy that poetry, as an artistic form of creation holds for a person trapped within the shackles of a society, "Poetry is a way to use language without colonizing words./ Poetry is a way to liberate words./ I cease being a coloniser. I become a free man" (35-37). The poet knows it very well that the tale that he has set out to tell may prove to be petty and unimportant to the rest of the world as he declares in the poem "Ghazal: after Ghalib of Juvenilia", "Smaller than small is the call of my heart/ What voice shall it have" (1-2). The poet accepts the fact with no qualms that his society is still not ready to listen to what he has to say "What tales shall it tell/ Where no tales can be told" (3-4). Yet he is not able to suppress his voice, his tale for he has no control over it – "Over it I have no control/ It is a fire" (11-12). To the poet, his story – his tale of being born gay, his being stigmatised for no reason of his own, is his inspiration that would enable him to claim his space in the society that he has always been denied.

Merchant is aware of the pitfalls of the tendency to value and appreciate homosexual writings only on the grounds of how radical and successful the writings are in disrupting and subverting fixed sexual binaries to achieve the political agenda of securing and fortifying a space in the mainstream society. The poet seems not to believe in too much of a sexist interpretation of works of literature since it kills the aesthetic literary value. He says, "Literature has no sex and poems have no organs" (Merchant 1999, xxvi). But the poet asserts that there are both good and bad writings in the realm of literature and he confidently proclaims that the homosexual literatures now in India form a great part of Indian Literature, and if they are to be valued, it should be done for they are great works of literatures that express human's mind and his life and position in the vast cosmos.

Another subtle aspect in homosexual relationship that sabotages the heterosexual binary is that homosexuals interchange their sex roles during sexual intercourse which is not applicable in the case of straight people. But the interesting fact is that although the homosexuals change their roles as it is often shown in homosexual literature to caricature

heterosexist bi-polarity, they have to ultimately succumb to the sexual paradigm of penetrator/penetrated as Merchant observes:

Gays have unthinkingly adopted the straight paradigm of penetrator/penetrated possible between one negative and one positive pole (female/male), but not applicable where there are two males in a relationship. (Merchant 2009, 25)

But it is notable that, despite active involvements in different forms from different social sections including creative writers on matters of minor sexual identities, homosexual discourse continues to be tabooed and submerged both in Indian academic world and social space. The hegemony of patriarchy, the traditional concept of canonicity and grand narrative still continue to suppress 'minor literatures' to use Deleuze's term. The inclusion of homosexual literature in Indian Syllabi taught at colleges and universities, is naturally a debatable issue which is acceptable, but the politics of secrecy, neutrality and indifference that is played out when it comes to talk about gay literatures, which, according to some people, decidedly lack 'literary prestige' (Raj Rao's interview with Arroyo) and quality, being lunatic outpourings of 'abnormal people' who primarily aim at earning money by appealing to the cheap sexual fantasies of ordinary people, is never acceptable. But the truth is as Hoshang Merchant in his Introduction to *Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia*, quotes Rumi: "To the sacred everything is sacred/ To the profane everything is profane" (xix).

At last it has to be admitted that through their writings the Indian gay writers have become successful to a great extent in creating a counter discourse for Indian homosexuals that is attracting attention from different directions such as mass media including filmmakers who dare to make films like *Bomgay* (1996), *Fire* (1996), *Yours Emotionally* (2007), and so on. Despite our hypocritical tendency to generalize, philosophize and universalize the real predicament of small sections of people because we fear to talk about what society does not permit, we cannot turn a blind eye to the socio-political agenda that every gay writing attempts to present as Merchant warns us in the Introduction to *Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia*, when he quotes Octavio Paz:

“Gay liberation and women liberation are political movements and have nothing to do with human liberation” (xii). Merchant’s reference to Octavio’s statement reinforces the author’s artistic resistance against the forcible universalization of the political ideologies that always characterize homosexual writings.

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