

## **Beyond the Binary: LGBTQ+ Representation in Indian Genre Literature**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Pushing the boundaries, confronting difficult situations and challenging readers to take a long, hard look at the reality of minorities like the LGBTQ+ community and their lives is the primary aim of queer Indian literature writers. It has not been an easy task, moving away from the imposed, harsh morals of colonialism, but there has been substantial evidence that telling these stories is vital, and reading them is just as important.*

*This paper explores the evolution of LGBTQ+ representation in Indian literature, tracing its origins back to the Vedas and Puranas and its evolution to contemporary narratives. It examines the cultural and social impacts of queer literature and how it has helped shape a new, more visible, more inclusive LGBTQ+ identity. Over time, Indian queer literature has challenged heteronormative ideals and reflected the complexities of gender and sexuality, transforming the image of the LGBTQ+ community and fostering acceptance.*

**Keywords:** LGBTQ+, queer community, literature, India, colonialism

### **Introduction**

LGBTQ+ representation in literature is not a new concept; it has been around for as long as literature has existed. Today, India's orthodoxy is being challenged as people find instances of LGBTQ+ representation in ancient texts, citing British colonialism as the prime cause of the nation's efforts to dismiss the queer population's identity. Indian literature, mostly written in vernacular languages, has evolved greatly. The earliest literature is said to be the canonical Vedas in Sanskrit, giving way to devotional, sacred, and philosophical writings and genres like erotic lyrics, court poetry, plays and folktales. (Luebering, 2024)

Contemporary Indian writing has nuanced character representations, allowing readers to look beyond the conventional labels and imagine endless possibilities. Gayatri Spivak calls it a "sustained uncoercive rearrangement of desires". (Singh, 2022) New LGBTQ+ fiction has its

unique set of challenges, from using appropriate language to getting parents' approval to succeeding in their goal of gently nudging young readers to familiarise themselves with a plethora of people that exist outside of the binaries they are exposed to. (Narang, 2023)

Some of the most popular genres in Indian fiction are historical novels, both fiction and non-fiction, mythological novels, and fantasy. It is no surprise that mythology is on the list, with epics like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* historically being some of the oldest forms of literature in the world. Indian Literature took a new turn with the advent of English education, brought in by Lord Macaulay during the colonisation period.

Fictional retellings of myths have grown tremendously in the recent past and have proved to be a lucrative market for readers overseas (Batra, 2017). Ashwin Sanghi, Amish Tripathi, and Ashok Banker are some of the most popular contemporary writers today. There has also been a rise in Indian-origin writers who write as a part of the diasporic community. Tasha Suri, a writer born and brought up in London, calls herself a "proud Punjabi". Her book 'Empire of Sand' (2018) made the TIME list of 100 Best Fantasy Books Of All Time (Bhimjyani, 2020), her genre being epic fantasy. Another author who made the TIME list is Roshani Chokshi with her book 'Aru Shah and the End of Time' (2018). Authors like these are stretching the boundaries of what Indian literature can be.

Contemporary Indian authors have been working towards incorporating queer identities in their work. The ever-evolving tapestry of Indian literature is being driven by authors who use their writing as tools for social reflection (Qureishi, 2024). They have the power to alter how gender and sexuality are portrayed positively in literature, bringing about cultural change and subverting stereotypes and conventions.

Most readers might assume that this is a new trend, but in reality, LGBTQ+ representation has been around for a very long time. R. Raj Rao, Ghalib Shiraj Dhalla, Mala Kumar and Abha Dawesar (Gothwal, 2022) are some authors who strove to create a space for the queer community by using fictional narratives as a way to depict LGBTQ+ characters in an unabashedly raw way.

## **Background**

Queer representation can be traced back in Indian history, with mythology and folklore being primary sources. The concepts of gender and sexuality in Hindu mythology have always been fertile ground for the development of LGBTQ+ identities. Effeminate men portrayed as the androgynous third gender, God-sanctioned same-sex attraction, and the Rig Veda prescribing an anti-binary thought process are all ways that the idea of homosexuality was legitimised. The Aravani ritual from *The Mahabharata* sees the worship of transgender individuals, and the Kama

Sutra acknowledges queerness as a natural universal constant. Dargah Quli Khan, in his notebook 'Muraqqu ha Delhi', which dates back to Medieval times, recorded his daily observations of homosexual relations in Delhi culture. (Chakrabarti, 2023)

The flow of queer identity has been rooted in Indian folklore and mythology, with widespread acceptance of an alternate sexual identity. Queer voices, post-colonialism, have been suppressed in Indian literary narratives, but they are making a timely comeback. Gender ambiguity is an acceptable part of the deities' identities. Lord Vishnu, for example, is a reincarnation of a woman, Mohini. Ancient Vedic texts represented a society where queer identity not only existed but was also respected. Arthanarishwara, the union of Shiva and Parvathi, manifests as a synthesis of two genders in one identity. (Chakraborty, 2018)

LGBTQ+ representation is an indispensable part of Indian storytelling. Tiwari says, "Queer representation in Indian literature has developed its own "unique" space over time, and it is this status that has been branded with queerness". (2010) The British put into practice the anti-sodomy law in 1861, which made homosexuality a criminal offence. (Chakrabarti, 2023) Modern queer scholars like Pramod Nayyar, Brinda Bose and Ranjita Biswas have contributed greatly to queer theory, allowing Indian writers to take bold steps in bringing out the realities of sexual identities that go beyond heteronormative conventions. Shakuntala Devi, Vijay Tendulkar, and Mahesh Dattani are some key writers that delve into the lives of the queer community. (Chavhan, 2018)

There have been some prominent steps taken forward in the LGBTQ+ literature scene. 'No One Else' (2015) is the first gay memoir in English by an Indian author, charting the author Siddharth Dube's life as he navigated his sexual identity from age 10. 'The Dancing Boy' (2011) by Ishani Kar-Purkayastha is about a young boy who is bullied and abandoned by his mother for liking sarees and makeup but finds acceptance from his neighbour. (Poddar)

The era of British colonialism saw severe censorship, with Victorian morals suppressing LGBTQ+ expression in India. There was a systematic erasure of any expressions of homosexuality, and puritanical morals were imposed, giving way to conservative views. 'Indira' by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee portrays a lesbian relationship and is hailed as one of the best books of the 1800s. (Chakrabarti, 2023) LGBTQ+ literature has been at the forefront of contesting the colonial machinery. After all, the pen is mightier than the sword. Unfortunately, however, most writers faced the numerous challenges of Section 377, along with ideals of morality, sexuality and culture.

Ismat Chughtai reached a revolutionary status in her writing when she published 'Lihaaf' (The Quilt) in the Urdu journal *Adaab-e-Lateef* in 1942. The short story is both celebrated and

controversial, dealing with forbidden desires and redefining lesbian relationships. She was put on trial for obscenity but ultimately was not charged since there were no explicit descriptions, only implications. She said to another writer, “No one ever told me that writing on the subject I deal with in *‘Lihāf’* is a sin, nor did I ever read anywhere that I shouldn’t write about this...disease...or tendency.” (Bhattacharya, 2019)

Homophobia during the British Raj was rampant. The first work in Hindi that highlighted queer relations was *‘Chocolate’* by Pandey Bechan Sharma (1927), which caused an uproar over homosexuality but also sparked a debate on the ethics of gay rights in modern India. (Ashi, 2021) It is incredible to see modern Indian narratives break the rigid structures of heteronormative conformity that colonial rule brought about.

## **Discussion**

Fiction, whether modern or contemporary, has a distinct portrayal of characters based on the country and its culture. For the LGBTQ+ community, however, representation matters, not the skewed, one-dimensional type, but varied, because diversity in portrayal allows queer people to realise they are not alone. The nuances and problems of heteronormativity can be deeply explored in literary narratives, holding up a mirror to society. (Singh, 2022)

Today, with more authors choosing to portray LGBTQ+ characters in their writing, it is no longer a massive taboo in India. They were rare in the earlier decades but prevalent; they stood out in a sea of conventions and upright morals. The manner of representation is one aspect, but the greater, more important aspects are those of the possibilities of change, alternate identities, and fluid, ambiguous sexualities.

Queer writing began to develop at the same time as homophobia under colonial rule, which meant that writings on homosexuality had to face the repercussions of discrimination. Paired with this was the problem that there was no pro-gay fiction, the queer characters were always the outlaws, the outcasts. (Johnpanicker, 2010)

While most queer works come in English, there are important works in vernacular languages. Sachin Kundalkar’s Marathi novel *‘Cobalt Blue’* (2013) and Vasudhendra’s Kannada volume of short stories *‘Mohanaswamy’* (2016) describe the beauty and pain of queer love. Authors like R. Raj Rao are pioneers of subverting queer tradition (Anjaria, 2019), refusing the deep-rooted conventional norms in place. 1980s India was a vibrant age for queer literature. Suniti Namjoshi, an openly lesbian writer, did not shy away from depicting LGBTQ+ characters. Mahesh Dattani wrote with the clear aim of reinterpreting gender roles and exploring sexualities. (Singh, 2021) The 2018 judgement decriminalising homosexuality was a big step towards better, more open representation of the LGBTQ+ community.

Stories, by nature, are designed to portray human life as it is and hold up a mirror to society for readers to reflect. Characters, through their actions and words, convey messages to people, either to educate, inform, or entertain. In recent times, Indian English literature mirrors modern thoughts, modern life, patriotism to a certain degree, and political prejudices. Its main goal is to facilitate the readers' responsiveness and awareness. The queer community's identity is dependent upon the stark binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality, upholding heterosexuality as the only norm. (Johnpanicker, 2010)

Queer Indian writers incorporate various concepts of tradition and culture. Some of the main aspects they explore are the contrast between traditional family values and the acceptance, or lack thereof, of sexual orientation and gender identities; intersectionality with aspects of caste, class, and religion; language and how it shapes identity; societal norms and prejudices that impact LGBTQ+ individuals; and diasporic experiences (Zankar) that connect writers to their roots as well as their diverse cultural environments.

Queer studies brought to light facts that most scholars earlier tended to ignore- that homosexuality is not a myth or a Western import. (Ashi, 2021) One of the first educational books on the LGBTQ+ community was 'The World of Homosexuals' (1977) by Shakuntala Devi, which included interviews with homosexuals from around the world. Kamala Das's autobiography, 'My Story' (1973), caused quite a stir, with her detailing her intimate connections with women. Vikram Seth also began to publish queer work in the 1980s, following which there was a spike in queer literature in the 1990s and 2000s.

Queer literature has been analysed to no end, with critics finding several nuances that casual readers might not be able to pick up on. 'Same-Sex Love in India: Readings in Indian Literature' (2001) by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai highlights the rich literary history of LGBTQ+ writing in India, from The Mahabharata to contemporary works. 'Queer: Despised Sexuality, Law and Social Change' (2004) is a valuable resource for understanding sexual orientations and issues related to them. (Chavhan, 2018) These books serve as a reference for readers to understand the essence of queer communities and their portrayal in literature.

Contemporary queer fiction as a whole possesses countless books, but some stand out for their unique approach and subtle yet intense writing. 'The Yogi Witch: Bloodlines and Legacies' was published in 2023 by Zorian Cross, a theatre writer by profession and a well-known activist (Singh, 2023) for the LGBTQ+ community. The book follows Jai Gill, a witch and demon hunter whose life becomes intertwined with a man who moves in next door. Although love is the central emotion of the novel, it is not a simple story; it has magic, adventure, and action.

Graphic novels used to be a niche and were rarely published in the past, but now they have become one of the most popular forms of storytelling. Amruta Patil's graphic novel 'Kari' (2008) has a fresh perspective, using a visual medium of storytelling to convey the complexity of sexuality. A unique blend of text and pictorial narratives, the book follows the titular character Kari, as she navigates life after a breakup. This mode conveys emotions and stories in ways that standard writing might not be able to. (Swain, 2024)

'The Devourers' (2016) by Indra Das has been called a work of "postcolonial speculative fiction" (Kurtz, 2016), but that would be an understatement. It is a surrealist novel of love, war, monsters, and the longstanding cultural, sexual, and racial violence that humans continue to inflict upon each other. Set in Kolkata, it follows Alok, a history professor and a stranger who claims to be a 'half-werewolf'. Books like these have had a profound impact on readers, opening their eyes to realities that they might not have empathised with earlier.

### **Conclusion**

Queer fiction has expanded by leaps and bounds in India over the decades. Invoking a sense of community is crucial in creating visibility and inclusivity for the LGBTQ+ community. Authors from different backgrounds should attempt to write in their languages, illustrating different realities and increasing readership. Having more contexts in a variety of vernacular tongues with different settings will prove to have effective implications on undoing assumptions surrounding the LGBTQ+ community and their lives. (Singh, 2022)

LGBTQ+ representation in India is deeply rooted in the country's mythology, folklore and historical narratives. From androgynous deities in Vedic texts to bold representations in modern Indian writing, queer writing has come a long way. Despite the suppression and criminalisation of queerness during the British Raj, LGBTQ+ writing has resurfaced in the post-colonial era. Challenging heteronormative ideas and reimagining the Indian landscape and people is what authors focus on. Indian literature writers have demonstrated over time their ability to adapt and evolve with the ever-changing societal norms and culture. LGBTQ+ literature in India, particularly fiction, owing to wider circulation, serves as a powerful medium for societal change, propagating representation, and challenging bias.

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