



Re-Examining ‘Female-Friendships’ in Indian English Fiction

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“You are neither unnatural, nor abominable, nor mad; you’re as much a part of what people call nature as anyone else; only you are unexplained as yet – you have not got your niche in creation. But some day that will come, and meanwhile don’t shrink from yourself, but face yourself calmly and bravely. Have courage; do the best you can with your burden. But above all be honourable. Cling to your honour for the sake of those others who share the same burden. For their sakes show the world that people like you and they can be quite as selfless and fine as the rest of mankind. Let your life go to prove this.”

- Radclyffe Hall (The Well of Loneliness – 1928)

An alliance with a man grants a woman heterosexual privileges, many of which are redefined by the law; religion and families. But, the woman has to pay its price at her own cost, since she has to destroy herself, her voice, intellect, and personal development, for a man’s need, in alliances. In a recent survey a woman gives the following reasons for her lesbian preferences: it is much easier to give in conditionally to a woman, to surrender ego; her skin is soft and smooth, *“no worry whether my body is adequate; no worry about the partner’s sexual moral judgement, where I was going to be placed on the spectrum of female families (angel or whore)”* (Hiite, 205-06). Her surrendering of ego is important, the implication being it is easier to surrender before one’s own sex than to the male who already rules, exploits and dominates the female. Tender approach is an important thing in this behaviour. This preference is also because of different kinds of psychic rapport between women not to be found in heterosexual relationship in which a woman’s role is inferior. She is rode over by the male. She is made love to, not made love with (205-06). And herein comes of another facet of lesbian behaviour – that is realising independence from the male which is another important principle of feminism or women’s struggle against subalternity.

The word lesbianism is derived from the Greek word “Lesbians”, a Greek island in the Aegean Sea which was the native place of Sappho, the 7th century BC lyric poetess who addressed her love poems to women (Pandeya, 201). Today lesbianism is a universal phenomenon where women find sexual fulfilment among themselves. It has been increasing in the conservative Indian society despite the society’s lack of recognition to this practice. One of the reasons for this can be the revolt of the women against the society and its norms which underrate women. Moreover, in refusing to the ideal pattern of behaviour, these lesbians shun the machinery, the main cog of which is respect for patriarchal dictators of ownership, thereby threatening to destabilise the system by usurping male privileges. Thus, homosexuality is seen as counter-revolutionary or a riposte to sexual subalternity in Indian English fiction.

“A woman should be aware of self-controlled, strong-willed, self-reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of woman-hood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense.”

- Manju Kapur, “A Married Woman”

Women’s writing in India has been multi-faceted but often persisting secretly, sometimes in pain and in defiance but the hallowed status is reserved for men as if they are the heir apparent to literary throne though women may excel in literary domain. Woman writers have to face censorship – social, professional and personal, challenges that are sexist and misogynist in nature. One label that is easily attributed to women’s work is that they ‘only speak about women’ and are often perceived as ‘feminist’ and hence disrupting the established family structure and peace at home. The most unacceptable women writers are those who question social order. The pillar of community – Marriage, Motherhood, control of sexuality and traditions must be preserved for the interests of preserving the culture.

Sexist remarks are flung towards women who have ventured to write about women’s sexuality and their bodies. Khushboo (Southern actress), ShabanaAzmi (Bollywood actress), MadhaviKutti (a Malayali writer), TasleemaNasreen (a Bangladeshi writer) and even TistaSitlavad had to face community censorship and social boycott. It is cruel and ironical but true that often community decides what women can wear, who to wed, whom they can sleep with, when to prosecute, how to conduct and what to write!

“Who to wed? Whom to revere?”

Couldn’t comprehend the male fear

Why to bow? How to conduct?

At each corner, obstacles erupt.

How to write? When to procreate?

What for the world is most appropriate?

I ask and get no replies ...

*Moments come, century flies**But the quest of female never dies!*

- Monika Choudhry's, Poem 'Quest'

This paper is a modest attempt to re-examine female friendships or bond between woman-woman or lesbianism or sexual subalternity as depicted in Indian English Fiction. The paper focusses on lesbian literary representation in India in light of the emergence of the lesbian as a cultural and political subject. The emergence of a political position based on the idea of the lesbian as a distinctive cultural presence occurs in India in the context of the controversy over Indian Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), the first publicly released lesbian-themed film in India. Right-wing Hindunationalists, irked at the seeming 'alternative' to heterosexuality that women were presented, damned the film as evidence of the 'corruption' of 'Indian' culture by the west, an argument based on Mehta's diasporic status and the film's funding by western sources. They declared lesbianism 'western' and merely an 'upper-class' phenomenon in India, claiming that lesbians "do not exist in India" and that the lesbian can only represent an 'inauthentic' Indian. No doubt Ismat Chughtai's '**Lihaaf**' (1941) set the trend but it was written long back and should have set the trend for writing and bringing into open more lesbian novels, stories or dramas but it did not happen. That perhaps can be explored as due to social pressures, patriarchal construction of society and the general milieu of the nation which was against depiction of such stories and by and large such stories remained sensational news items to be read, discussed and then forgotten.

"I am still labelled as the writer of Lihaaf. The story brought me so much notoriety that I got sick of life. It became the proverbial stick to beat me with and whatever I wrote afterwards got crushed under its weight."

- Ismat Chughtai

Ismat Chughtai's controversial short story 'Lihaaf' is often revoked by critics and scholars as a bold instance of radical feminist politics. Published in an Urdu literary journal titled 'Adaab-i-Latif' in 1941, the story created a huge uproar among its readers. The focal point of the entire controversy was what a pubescent girl who comes to stay with her aunt, Begum Jann, sees and hears every night:

"I woke up at night and was scared. It was pitch dark and Begum Jaan's quilt was shaking vigorously as though an elephant was struggling inside. "Begum Jaan", I could barely form the words out of fear. The elephant stopped shaking and the quilt came down. "What is it? Get back to sleep." Begum Jaan's voice seemed to come from somewhere." (Chughtai 38).

The king was quick to charge her with obscenity and a trial against her was held in the Lahore Court. Chughtai recounts in her autobiography how she had laughed when the police came up at her door with the summons from the Lahore Court. ***"As I heard the heading – Ismat Chughtai vs. Crown – I broke into laughter. Good God, what crime have I committed that the Exalted King***

has brought this lawsuit against me?" (Gender, Self-Representation and Sexualized Spaces: A Reading of Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf*: Tanvi Khanna, p-50).

Despite being advised to tender an apology and pay the fine, Chughtai decided to fight the case in the court. The final verdict went in her favour as the story does not make any explicit mention of a sexual activity or a lesbian relationship. The story is often seen by many as an exemplar of Chughtai's radical feminist stance. She notes in her autobiography that her mind was "an ordinary camera that records reality as it is" (Gender, Self-Representation And Sexualized Spaces: A Reading Of Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* Tanvi Khanna, p-50). She wrote about it because she was aware that such relationships exist concealed within the four walls of the house that have a semblance of normalcy.

Ismat Chughtai does not explicitly state what goes on between the two women beneath the quilt. The shadow cast on the wall in the form of an elephant is used as a metaphor for the physical relationship between the two women: "*in the dark Begum Jaan's quilt was once again swaying like an elephant. "Allah! Ah! ... "I moaned in a feeble voice. The elephant inside the quilt heaved up and then sat down. I was mute. The elephant started to sway again"* (Chughtai 40). Chughtai refuses to say anything about the relationship between the two women till the very end. Towards the end of the story, when the girl resolves to peep beneath the quilt to check what goes on there every night she exclaims, "*Good God!* And plunges into her bed beneath her quilt.

Unlike Chughtai who does not explicitly name the relationship between the two women, Sunita Namjoshi directly addresses the need to legitimise lesbianism and argues that a woman's love for a woman is both natural and quite ancient. She complains that books, stories and society all collude in propagating the myth of compulsory heterosexuality and in all these versions men love women and women love men and men ride off and have all sorts of adventures while women stray at home. In a number of poems included in her collections '**Jackass**' and '**The Lady**' and '**Blue Donkey Fables**' Namjoshi celebrates lesbian eroticism.

Shobha De in her revolutionary novel '**Strange Obsession**' discusses the obsession of a lesbian called Minx. Her transformation into a lesbian is due to an Electra complex. Minx is attracted towards her father when she is hardly thirteen years old. She deludes herself to the belief that it is not she who wants physical relationship but her father. Since sex with her father is incest so she imagines that he rapes her and colludes her to have sex. She also experiences a kind of patriarchy and also associates it with her childhood beatings, revolutionary to the existent culture and society. For Minx, lesbianism was a result of hatred and fear of deception from men. It was a revolt against society and norms laid down to under-rate woman. By belonging to another woman Amrita (an upcoming model), protecting and helping her, she posed a great threat to male dominance and disrupted patriarchal oppression.

De's another novel '**Snapshots**' discusses Surekha and Reema who are representatives of average Indian married women who have to bear unfulfilling relationships. Any middle class housewife can identify with Reena in her conjugal experiences;

“... she lay awake for hours beside her snoring husband. That night decided all the nights that followed. Nights that had an in-built pattern and rhythm without the slightest excitement or variation. Ravi discharged his husbandly obligation literally. And expected Reema to be satisfied if not actually grateful.” (Snapshots, Chapter IV, p-163)

Such unfulfilling living conditions surely leave a scar on the psyche of a sensitive woman. Placed in such a situation, a woman is bound to face disillusionment and frustration which further results in identity crisis. The entire thing culminated in imbalance of energy level. To equalise the imbalance, she resorts to various ways which may include lesbianism, masochism, sadism etc. which are otherwise considered as abnormal.

A ‘**Married Woman**’ displays another form of relationship. No force, no tricks, just plain love. Aastha and Pipeelika both love each other and their physical intimacy is a proof of that. The reader feels for them as they make each other’s life joyous and treat each other with utmost love till situations do them apart.

While Minx faces hatred and wrath of readers, for the Girl, the author, not to make her a villainous character ironically uses: “Oh! this is one of the strangest examples of ironical destiny. Unbearable to see – beyond tolerance.” (Garg 2006, 144) Though the author condemns her behaviour, she empathises with her, as the Girl had not opted for lesbianism on her own but had been influenced into behaving in that unacceptable manner by other girls. Pipeelika on the contrary gains respect for her ability to move out of the relationship without complicating the situation and making things difficult for Aastha.

Another important issue raised in common is the problem of fully filled family, that is, the baby. Amrita desires to have babies of her own and fulfils her dream with her husband Rakesh. Aastha returns to her children, and Amilya too realizes the need for having her own children. This makes them sure of their natural relationship with progeny. In all the three novels, woman can only be a ‘precursor’ as universally, life is in need of a permanent settlement and this is based on satisfaction flowing up to the brim. *“The best course of life is that the brimful comes from one and only one mooring because the emotional and physical feedback flowing from various corners is bound to blast. Thus this shows that Indian middle class is still not prepared to accept any immoral or unnatural relationship in life. Thus, let the breeze blow from a satisfying corner so that it gently fans to cool down pains, burnings, and dissatisfaction ever arising in life.”* (Garg 2006, Preface).

In Rita Garg’s, ‘**Precursor of Love**’, the Girl, as she is referred to in the entire novel, is a woman who has a series of female partners. Her carefree behaviour, her effervescent attitude, her smile and her confidence - all these qualities make her a very popular girl and it is these qualities that attract Amilya, the protagonist of the novel, to the Girl. The Girl, an exporter by profession has a chance encounter with Amilya at a fair. *‘Although Amilya has not seen her earlier; even then, something eye - catching is attractive enough about the stranger.’* (Garg 2006, 1)

Another accidental encounter and they both become friends. Amilya was an orphaned lawyer who suffered from loneliness and in the Girl, she looks for a friend. On the contrary, the Girl had been in and out of many lesbian relationships and was nursing the wounds of her last failed relationship when her eyes fall upon Amilya and she thinks that she has found her mate. The desire to come out with her maiden novel makes Amilya get friendly with the Girl as she eyes the Girl as a character for her novel. Her jocularity is her USP and her multi-faceted features make her an ideal literary character in the eyes of Amilya: *'The Girl has the typicality of the moon – always changing in form and shape. Nothing can be so effervescent as she. Sometimes, she talks much affectionately but the next the next moment there is rigour. The talks may be positive now and a total negation next second.'* (Garg 2006, 14)

The Girl enjoys the status of being a 'man' in the relationship and even behaves like one. Though Amilya is senior to her in age yet it is the Girl who seems to have an upper hand in the relationship and Amilya meekly submits to her. Amilya finds herself bound into a strong emotional relationship with the Girl and considers it her first religious binding to keep the Girl jubilant. Amilya is often torn in a mental conflict whenever the tempest of the Girl's mood swings arises, but the Girl uses her emotional tactics to mellow down Amilya. Tears were her last weapon and if they proved insufficient to move Amilya then other Instruments of emotion were used to victimize her: *"If you don't listen to me, I will do something to myself. I would kill myself."* (Garg 2006, 36) This was enough to make Amilya follow her like a domestic animal.

Initially Amilya befriends the Girl due to her need for a character for her novel but later the seed of emotions gets sown and they become mutually interdependent. Their relationship starts presuming shapes and taking dimensions. The Girl desires consummation but never speaks very openly about it for the fear of losing Amilya. On one occasion when she could not control her emotions and blurts out her desires to see Amilya bedecked in a red saree at the time of their consummation, Amilya is taken aback and the Girl apologizes for the same.

An astonishing feature about their relationship is that the Girl is never vociferous or insistent about anything. She does not put Amilya under any compulsion. On the contrary, MeenakshiIyengar or Minx as she is called in ShobhaDe's, **'Strange Obsession'**, was an emotionally aggressive woman. One could also compare her to a Patient of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder as she shows insane interest in Amrita. Her liking for Amrita cannot be equated with the Girl's liking for Amilya in **'Precursor of Love'** or that of Pipeelika for Aastha in **'A Married Woman'**. The other two can be termed as natural, but Minx is paranoid about Amrita. There is nothing natural in her attraction to Amrita as the terror she unleashes for making Amrita hers is spine chilling.

Some years ago, different sexual orientations were considered taboo in Indian society; but with the recent judgement of the Delhi High Court decriminalising homosexuality, a new era has begun in a male dominated value-structure, familial and societal maladjustment lead to inner fragmentation thereby forcing women to seek emotional outlet elsewhere. Novels and films

dealing with this subject have been made for quite some time now. Awareness about homosexuals is fast spreading in India and there are fancy parades being held annually to encourage homosexuals to reveal their sexual orientation.

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