

## QUEER SEXUALITY AND INDIAN TRADITIONS - A CULTURAL NARRATIVE IN RUTH VANITA'S LITERATURE

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### Abstract

The term “Queer” was traditionally defined as “weird” or “peculiar” in a negative or lowly sense, most of the time. Hence, Ruth Vanita is one of the first authors to use “same-sex love” rather than “queer” in her literatures to define same-sex relationships like gay, lesbian, bisexual, intersex, and transgender. This article is aimed to define a cultural narrative of Indian traditions in context of queer sexuality in the literatures of Ruth Vanita. This research paper will discover major issues, concerns and practices associated with queer narratives and track same-sex marriages and various queer sexualities articulated with several cultural and political scenarios. Ruth Vanita is a queer theorist who explores major issues of same-sex love in her creative works.

**Keywords:** queer, same-sex love, same-sex relationship, queer sexuality, Indian traditions, literatures, Ruth Vanita

### INTRODUCTION

The term “Queer” was basically used to define something “peculiar” or “weird<sup>1</sup>. It was basically used in a lowly and negative sense. In this sense, one of the first usages in record was by John Sholto Douglas’s letter in 1894 “The 9<sup>th</sup> Marquis of Queensberry” (Foldy). In a generic sense, the term “Queer” has been a universal term which consists of various categories of same-sex relationships like bisexual, lesbian, gay, intersex, and transgender (Rao). Vanita uses the term “same-sex love” instead of “queer” as queer has “unacceptable connotations for the Indians” as the term “queer” is known to have “Western import”. For example, the transgender community has never felt comfortable in India as they are organized under “hijra” as their cultural space and specificity covers a varied articulation (Shah et al). Hence, the term “queerness” destabilizes the categories of lesbian, gay, and transgender to cover all different categories.

Rebirth is another trope to validate same-sex love in pre-colonial era in India. According to Vanita and Kidwai, the ideals of earlier births legitimize the actions which are considered inappropriate in present birth. Rebirth gives birth to various constructs and divides love across two people of conflicting class, gender, or caste which are supposed to be involuntary due to their early life. Somaprabha falls in love with Kalingasena, a beautiful princess and this love is attributed to her earlier birth in Kathasaritsagara by Somadatta.

These women used to come from different hierarchies and classes and they are of similar gender. But their desire for same sex is legitimized by attributing their love to their earlier birth. Kritivasa Ramayana is the Bengali text which shows same-sex love among women. The birth of saint

<sup>1</sup> Oxford English Dictionary. “Queer”, [en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/queer](http://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/queer).

Bhagiratha in this text is credited to the same-sex relationship between two women. The father of Bhagiratha died before conceiving and the divine sanction of Lord Shiva made his birth possible. This episode is very important to know the cultural setting behind ancient India. Though marriage and normative homosexuality have still been the cultural norm, it is also possible to highlight the transgressive gender and sexual possibilities. It is divinity which can justify the same.

Sex change is another trope came up with divine intervention. The Hindu deities were fluid and multidimensional in their true form and their variability and multiplicity were some of their great features. A deity might come up in male, female, or even in nonhuman form. One of the three major Hindu gods, Lord Vishnu took the form of Mohini, an apsara. Another major God, Lord Shiva approaches him and asks him to see his form of beautiful woman. He knew the vague nature of her gender but he got attracted to her and followed her.

Here, the ambiguity in gender realizes the same-sex desire amongst two gods. Here, Shiva is not unaware or deceived of the true gender of Mohini but he purposely pursues and wants her. Shiva's devotees realize all possibilities and this encounter between same sexes gave birth to Lord Ayappa who is born with the union of two men. This late medieval legend was the addition to Mohini and Shiva union and the child was called "ayoni" which means a child born with non-vaginal sex (Vanita and Kidwai).

Vatsyana's Kamasutra is one of the most famous literary works which have gained universal attention amidst the vast literary outputs in ancient India. Everyone should act as per the country's customs when it comes to non-normative sexual practices. Kamasutra and other classic texts prescribed and described "queer sexual behaviors" as "auparishtaka" aka "mouth congress". Sexual practices which have been discussed here don't usually make it to procreation. Instead, it leads to pleasure. The ancient India represents the non-procreative sexual behavior or queer deviation from the given sexual practice. In this period, one of the limitations of sexuality research is lack of pre-colonial laws based on queer sexuality. There are various kinds of religious texts present in ancient India that make Hindu religion very complex. The Laws of Manu or "Manusmriti" is one of the first treatments that keep men from practicing non-vaginal encounters. There is a lack of evidence about anyone being punished or killed for having same-sex relationships in ancient India.

### **MOTIVATION FOR RESEARCH**

Queer theory is much more likely to attract feminist criticism when it comes to address issues on power, sexuality, and marginalized population. The way in which sexuality and gender is explored is a major concern associated with queer theory. In this study, major issues, practices, and concerns related to queer narratives will be discovered by tracking several queer sexualities and same-sex marriages articulated through various interdisciplinary and disciplinary political and cultural elements. Here, the concerns and key issues of queer theorist Ruth Vanita in her creative works will be explored.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Sexual preference can be measured by observing whether an individual would want to engage in sexual behavior with someone of opposite sex or with same sex. Gender identity is yet another concern, i.e. whether an individual thinks of herself or himself as woman or man. The level of

testosterone (male hormones) or androgens choose whether a child would develop into a boy or girl. Brains can also be organized in a different way due to androgen levels which lead to behavioral changes later in life. Queer sexuality is a major concern among Indian authors and scholars. In this study, alternative sexualities will be traced in representations and debates on non-western queer sexualities in Indian narratives. The researcher will apply an intersectional and multipronged approach on the narratives of Ruth Vanita.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is Ruth Vanita's take on Indian women's marriage and movements?
- Why does she uncover queer sexuality and how does she relate to Indian literature?

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To find out how Ruth Vanita deals with growing awareness of queer sexuality in India
- To present her cultural narratives in queer sexuality

### METHODOLOGY & SUBSTANCE

In order to answer the above research questions, secondary data has been taken from research articles, online journals, digital libraries, news portals, interviews, and other reliable sources. This article is aimed to explore the cultural narratives and the role Ruth Vanita plays in generating awareness regarding queer sexuality in the country.

### RESULTS

Ruth Vanita is a strong supporter of homosexual marriage in India. She is the co-director of Southeast and South Asian Studies at the "University of Montana" and a professor of English who has documented same-sex marriages thoroughly which have taken place in the country without any legal recognition.

#### Q1. What is Ruth Vanita's take on Indian women's marriage and movements?

She argues that even if state refuses to consider a union as wedding despite being desirable, union should be recognized as marriage in her book "*Love's Rite: Same Sex Marriage in India and the West* (2005)". The book has recently reissued as "*Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India*" along with a new preface, new cover, and a list of all the homosexual couples who either committed suicide or got married since 1980, according to Ruth Vanita in an interview. These types of marriages have not been recognized by many governments over the years. For example, England didn't recognize Quaker and Jewish marriages before 1753 and various states didn't recognize marriages between whites and blacks in the US until 1967. But these marriages were real and actually took place. A state cannot define reality. The state may or may not recognize reality but the fact is that reality persists.

She further argues that same-sex couples are getting married globally by different religious ceremonies over the centuries and living their lives as partners. Urmila Srivastava and Leela Namdeo were two policewomen in India who got married in 1987 in India, making it the first marriage of its kind. It happened when same-sex marriage was not recognized in any part of the world. Many more marriages have taken place since then. Since 1980, a lot of young couples across India committed joint suicide or committed marriages as per the religious rites across India.

Another interesting thing is that they were non-English speaking and belonged to low-income groups.

Hence, majority of them were unaware of any feminist or LGBT movement. Most of them were farm workers, factory laborers, fisherwomen, nurses, Muslims, Hindus, Dalits, and tribals. Few of them were men but the majority of them were women. Some of these are martyrs, while most of them were real-life examples of marriage equality. The book “Love’s Rite” follows their stories as they are unsung heroes. These days, media publish only high-profile or celebrity gay or lesbian weddings and keep claiming that they are the first couples in a specific city or state, though little-known couples have already done that in majority of such places.

Those couples were already getting married even before the 20<sup>th</sup> century and some of those marriages have been documented in “Love’s Rite”. Family recognition means a lot for a lot of couples who come from low-income groups, even though they don’t get government recognition. Their families supported them in their decisions and even visited their wedding ceremonies and blessed them in many cases. In order to assure some rights like the right to take decisions for the health of a spouse, the right to inherit, the right to have a visa, and the right to a funeral, government recognition is still needed.

According to Ruth Vanita, marriages have varied so greatly over space and time that commitment is the only important element. The commitment also varies in different places, times, communities, and even couples. Various couples work out all kinds of adjustments among them. It goes without saying that commitment is not all about monogamy and there have been polyandrous and polygamous marriages took place over the history. There have also been valid and legal marriages as well. Married couples also live in various cities and calibrated couples also keep their finances separate. Some of the basic commitments include sharing and discussing key decisions, taking care of each other (especially when one spouse is in a financial crisis or sick), and giving priority to each other.

A lot of changes have been made in marriage laws over time over the century and they have changed beyond expectations, especially focusing on women’s right for marriage, question of divorce, and choice to marry for both adults. It is the first lawful change ever asked for. Literature shows the actual lifestyle of people and gives perception to how they would want to live and can live. The rights are described in the literature that people take care of each other and challenges they face in a conflicted or hostile situation. Literature also visualizes and depicts the freedom of relationships, i.e. same-sex and cross-sex marriages and friendships (Hindustan Times).

One of the famous examples includes two Hindu women urged to marry at the Registrar of Marriages in Chandrapur district of Maharashtra. At that time, proposals were drafted by women’s organizations to amend the Special Marriage Act and Hindu Marriage Act. It obviously happened because Hindu Marriages Act didn’t specify the gender of partners in its initial definition inadvertently. Police and local officials forced the younger girl to drop this idea. But national organizations for women rights didn’t take cognizance of getting another kind of marriage legalized and its possibility.

In addition, they haven't taken any decision thoroughly for mandatory monogamy. Though monogamy is a viable choice and the option for many, they cannot be compulsory for any reason for everyone and the only kind of marriage. Polyandry and polygamy has been practiced in various communities but most communities have outlawed those practices. The undesirable inequalities and economic consequences have often confused these practices.

**Q2. Why does she uncover queer sexuality and how does she relate to Indian literature?**

Ruth Vanita is an activist, academician, and a writer who specializes in South Asian literature, lesbian and gay studies, and gender studies. She was the co-founder of "Manushi: A Journal about Women and Society" in 1978. She was known for rereading the works of Urdu Poets of the 18th and 19th centuries, William Shakespeare, and Virginia Woolf. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai also wrote "Same-Sex Love in India". She wrote "Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West". Currently, she works at the University of Montana as the "Professor of Liberal Studies and Women's Studies".

She was also the professor at Delhi University back then where she co-edited women's magazine "Manushi" from 1978 to 1990. She edited "Queering India (2002)", "Virgin Mary: Same Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination (1996)", and "Strangers on the Roof (1994)", an English version of a Rajendra Yadav's Hindi novel. Gandhi's Tiger and Sita's smile are her collected essays which have been introduced recently (Bhan). Ruth Vanita has always been a women's right activist since her early age. She was the founding co-editor of "Manushi" as part of the women's movement. She was also engaged in studying women's predicament and read mostly about sexuality and gender, even though these were not much discussed in India in the 1980s. She was literally impressed with the way different ways to love and live are explored by legendary writers.

Women's love and lives (both same sex and cross sex) in late 18th century and early 18th century are described in her recent Urdu poetry "Gender, Sex and the City: Urdu Rekhti Poetry 1780-1870" in Lucknow. This erotic, funny, and playful poetry was later labeled obscene and eventually disappeared. She feels that pre-colonial behaviors of life discussed in the poetry survive in Bombay cinema for some time. She is writing on Bombay cinema's courtesans. In the pre-colonial era, a courtesan and matrilineal household was a place where women could earn decently, gain higher education, live with other women, and pick their sexual partners. Bombay cinema shows a faint shadow of that kind of lifestyle.

Ruth Vanita feels that the influence of books, TV, or movies is not the one-way process. Viewers or readers choose what they see and what they read and they are not passive. Different people have different takes on the same movie or book. All women don't love or hate the same movies or books. It is not proven that there is any difference in writing by male and female authors related to queer sexuality. A lot of tests are done to find out whether it is possible for the readers to differentiate a text authored by a female or a text authored by a male and most of the readers (whether gay or straight, male or female) cannot do so. She writes about Urdu poets who write with great eroticism and lyricism about sexual relationships between male and female, female and female, and male and male.

Women have always been deprived of their rights to publish and write like men. A lot of men were also deprived of that chance. According to "A Room of One's Own" by Woolf, one can choose to



depend on fingers of one hand. A lot of men from the working class didn't have the opportunity to attend the university but they could still write and be read across the world. Despite belonging to the upper class, women didn't have as many chances to read and to write as men. So, anyone who wishes to write should get the opportunity and time will tell who will come out as a shining writer.

In the book "Same-Sex Love in India", Ruth Vanita didn't use "queerness" term. Instead, she has written same-sex love widely in Asian societies. But this aspect of literary history has been either abandoned in the modern world or covered up. Many European colonizers were shocked when they arrived in India by seeing various sexual arrangements in India and the fact that same-sex love was not suppressed like in the west. Actually, it was written very openly. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Lord Byron changed "he" to "she" in his poems, while his contemporaries chose to write explicitly in Lucknow about amorous and sexual relationships between men.

Across the Europe, there was a death penalty for sodomy at that time. There was no such law in India. The British immediately changed the education system and the laws when they officially took control of the government in India in 1857. They already removed Section 377 in England a long time ago. They brought this law when they took control of the government and Indians struggled with it for a long time until recently when it was finally lifted. Both Hindus and Muslims defeated Indian elites to become the conquerors.

Leaving heterosexual monogamy, all sexual arrangements were removed as part of this. Polyandry, polygamy, same-sex relations, and courtesans had to go away. Same-sex desire had been unspeakable by the 1920s. She translated the stories of Ugra, a Hindi writer, who wrote about desires from male to male in the 1920s when everyone told him not to mention this subject. Indian educated society had witnessed this revolutionary change from the 1820s to the 1920s. Europeans started changing their minds in the 1960s. They eliminated their own sodomy laws and provided full civil rights to the gay people in the most western democracies. Unfortunately, Indians knew almost nothing about their own literature and history. Homosexuality had no existence in India because it had been called non-existent by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century while it is more visible in the West. This is how cultures can turn 360 degrees and get almost opposite of what they were hundreds of thousands of years later.

Rationalizing or justifying sexual orientation and preferences by referring to Hindu epics or Puranas is very prevalent on social media. Jewish and Christian scholars don't hesitate rereading the religious texts like Bible to find positive perception of queer sexuality like saints' stories. They don't feel that religion is associated with only the fundamentalists and they also don't feel that if they find anything positive in tradition, they will be the victim of fundamentalism.

At some point, Vanita feels that Indians have internalized colonial beliefs for Hindus as primitive, backward, and misogynist believers. How many Hindus have read an original epic or Purana or even the entire text in the translated version? We don't want to be called "Hindu nationalists". She further said that even she doesn't read epics or "Puranas" to "rationalize" or "justify" anything. She doesn't think it necessary. She tries to educate herself with her literature on her own tradition. If it is supposed to be highly positive related to desire, she feels that we should know it rather than thinking otherwise. A literary work is more than just a pan or pot that can be used. It is aimed to

delight and illuminate. She reads Upanishads and epics for enlightenment as they give “ananda” like nothing else.

## CONCLUSION

The Hindu tradition lacks gender categorization as a concept on the basis of sexual orientation of an individual. The third gender has been known as male with effeminate behavior or traits in previous Sanskrit texts. On the other side, heterosexuals could get penetration or give by changing gender. They could play both sexual roles of submissive female and dominant male. The flow of queer sexuality has been rooted in Indian mythology and folklore. The form of sexual identities can be accepted in mainstream culture. These days, queer sexuality has been the subalterns and their voices have been invisible and suppressed. Indian literature is the womb of religious practices and multicultural identities.

These days, there has been a prevalence of queer literature in India as authors are independent and they have their publishing rights and authority to create content in digital platforms and social media. Same-sex desires are still framed as “import from the West” in 21<sup>st</sup> century. A lot of texts published in 20<sup>th</sup> century strive to have pure Indianness of womanhood or manhood which represents same-sex desires (Vanita, 2002). A lot of scholars have presented queer sexuality in much older histories than colonial era. Earlier forms of sexual identities and sexuality were restructured to fit new norms of the colonial world and it ultimately turned out to be part of nationalist rhetoric.

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