

The Indian Subaltern and Her Sexual Identity: A Study of the Unspoken Intersectionality as seen in Maya Sharma's Loving Women: Being a Lesbian in Unprivileged India

Audrey Correa

<https://doi.org/10.51897/interalia/BBPG3581>

abstract

Women in India are positioned at the axes of multiple marginalisations such as gender, class, religion and caste. For the feminist in India, these pluralities make the fight to express one's sexual agency seem frivolous to say the least, especially one which does not fit within the hegemonical normative. Today, however, the queer body has become an important political vote bank. But is it only the male upper caste, upper class queer body that is visible? The study examines Maya Sharma's documentation of the lived realities of women from un-privileged India, victims of multiple marginalisations, through the lens of queer theory, intersectionality theory and Spivak's critique of the Subaltern. By applying these theories to the lived narratives in Maya Sharma's book, the paper attempts to analyse how these real-life protagonists' identity is moulded by multiple layers of systemic oppression and subjugation, and how their sexual identity is often erased. Indian culture's proscriptive policies, especially with respect to women and sexuality, compel women in the margins to either repress, thereby erasing themselves, or create self-curated spaces which are not always safe. Even today, intersectional identities of caste, class and gender converge to create a unique and nuanced experience of oppression, especially for the woman 'othered' due to her sexual identity.

keywords

homosocial, intersectionality, lesbian, queer, sexual identity, subaltern

India, Sexuality and Queerdom

India is a very complex and dynamic nation state which throughout its history has had to continually struggle through multiple invasions, rulings, and trans migrations. This has given rise to a heterogenous population. However, the current right wing (conservative) political wave shows an attempt to impose a monolithic cultural dynasty. Once, a weakly woven spread of provinces, the ousting of the colonial rule in 1947 succeeded in creating a single nation state, which miraculously stayed afloat as the largest and most densely populated democracy despite its ramified diversity. Culturally proclaimed as a Hindu nation by the current governance, the upper class-upper caste patriarchy (read as Dominant Upper Class Male Hindu Brahmin) laid down certain rules to be

followed. Some of these rules were ancient, but some were modified for the convenience and comfort of the patriarchal hegemony, drawing from over a century long colonial influence. One such draconian colonial influence was the Anti-Sodomy Law (Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code) that criminalised sexual intercourse between two consenting adults other than the cis-heteronormative, which the citizenry had accepted unquestioningly. Section 377, disturbingly, brought under scanner all adults who were not heterosexual, who did not accept the gender binary, and determined that they could be punished with imprisonment and fined for their homosexuality. Ironically, the way the law had been worded negated the existence of 'same sex desire' between women. As Geeti Thadani (1996: 79) has posited, "[c]riminalising lesbianism would have meant making it visible" and that would mean giving agency to the "fully domesticated" woman. The term sodomy and "carnal intercourse" as used in the law were indicative of penile penetration:

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 a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.

Explanation: Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section. (Union of India, Section 377, IPC)

Non-reproductive sex was deemed 'abnormal' in India, from the colonial era to the year when the law was finally decriminalised (2018). Ironically, the juridical erasure of the lesbian subjectivity was ludicrous, even as the horrific and discriminatory anti-sodomy law (Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code) had blinded itself to the existence of women as subjects who would desire sex, and that this desire could be directed towards the same sex.

'Othering' of anyone who did not follow the state-controlled narrative of penile-vaginal intercourse between man and woman to procreate was licensed. Procreation, within the confines of socially and culturally sanctified marriage, was the primary discourse, and still is today. Even a heterosexual couple who chooses not to marry or procreate would fall dangerously near the margins of queering, as posited by Kaustav Bakshi and Rohit Dasgupta (2019: 9) in their introduction to *Queer Studies: Texts, Contexts, Praxis*. The battle for the decriminalisation of this law began with *Naz Foundation vs. Union of India*, and was won by them in 2009. But the reprieve was short lived, with the *Koushal* Judgement repealing it. Finally, September 2018, preceded by extensive advocacy and activism, brought decriminalisation, leading to euphoric joy among the Queer community of India (Jain and Sircar, 2024: vii). Arvind Narrain's (2004: 161) essay, "Queer: Despised Sexuality, Law and Societal Change," reflects on the nuances of the legal battle against the ghastly and inhumane anti-sodomy law,

while historicising sexuality's conflicting relationship with law since the ancient cultural indoctrination by the dominant class. Dipika Jain and Oishik Sircar in their introduction to *Desire and its Discontents* argue the fallacy of Queer Freedom in neo-liberal and globalised India after the decriminalisation of the Anti-Sodomy Law in the year 2018 (Supreme Court of India's Navtej Johar Judgement) (2024: vii). This freedom, under the ruling of the right-wing Hindutva (conservative) atmosphere, comes across as a political agenda which could impose compulsory homonormativity on the queer body; it has also been criticised by queer advocates like Ashley J. Tellis (2012: 142) as being "classist, casteist, sexist and complicit with power structures of the most oppressive kind." This belief stems from the cultural appropriation of the queer community as having always existed in Indian literature and iconography, while eliding the elephant in the room: the dehumanisation of the queer body via the continued imposition of the anti-sodomy law by all politically and socially powerful bodies since independence.

Paola Bacchetta (2012: 4) has stated in her study, "Hindu nationalism is an expression not of queer sexualities and mentalities but rather of queerphobic ones." Hence, for the nationalist, the expulsion of the 'others' was imperative to safeguard the nation's ideology. Jasbir Puar (2007) has, however, disputed the duality of accepting modernity, issues of nationalism and creating boundaries which puts in question the tolerance of sexuality (specifically homosexuality) by the right-wing Hindu male. For that matter, even western countries, where queer bodies are allowed to thrive and are protected by law, compress the flamboyance of queerness by purposefully enforcing homonormativity through the concepts of 'marriage' and 'family' as the ideal way of assimilating with the mainstream normative society (Bakshi and Gupta, 2019: 9). This is endorsed by Diane Richardson (2015: 208-224), who maintains that the 21st century has seen progressive discussions and activism which have been directed towards attaining the basic rights of a global citizen, like the right to marriage and financial security, for queer communities in large parts of the world. To this day, the heterosexual procreative family unit is the foundation of the Indian national value system. Aligning with this, in India too, there has been advocacy for same sex marriages, but this has been predicated by scores of news reports of suicides and attempted suicides of queer couples, specifically deaths and ostracization of lesbian lovers (Thadani, 2016: 101-113). Such hegemonic heteronormative discourses stem from homonegativity and impose homonormativity which would occlude queer radicalism, and the choice of the Indian queer person to remain single (Bakshi, 2019: 63).

The colonial era orchestrated the 'epistemic overhaul' of the Indian knowledge system by the Eurocentric knowledge system, which led to the insidious ghosting of the *other*, the *other* being the primitive Indian who did not fit in with the Western idea of the masculine. There were historical (oral as well as iconographic), ephemeral evidences of the presence of the queer body in Indian culture which could not be denied (Vanita and Kidwai, 2001; Thadani, 2016). Nevertheless, the evident presence of the queer body in various mythological texts, palimpsests and epics of India was skilfully erased by adorning them with divine intervention, as being sanctified by the Gods, and the idea of the heterosexual tradition was forcefully and singularly perpetuated (Thadani, 2016: 4). Devdutt Pattanaik, a well-known Indian queer historian, advocates of queer rights such as Ruth Vanitha and Saleem Kidwai, lesbian queer writer and advocate, Nivedita Menon, and many others have given scores of examples of homosexual love, transgenders, cross dressing, cross gendering and lesbian same sex intimacies occurring in the *Great and Little Traditions of India*, all of which is veiled with divine intervention. King Bhagiratha, born of two *bhagas* (vulvas), was born as a lump of flesh, without a skeletal structure, and divine intervention made him whole (Vanita and Kidwai, 2001: 116), Lord Ayyappa, born out of the consummation of the male Gods, Shankar and Vishnu (the latter donned the avatar of Mohini, a seductress, indicating cross dressing), are a few examples of non-normative desires and bodies as depicted in ancient texts of India (Vanita and Kidwai, 2001: 109). Terms such as *panda*, *sanda*, *kliba*, *napumsaka* (meaning 'not quite men') featured in various texts and treatises such as the *Shusruta-sambhita*, the *Naradasmriti* and the *Manusmriti* (Pattanaik, 2014: 86).

The 'not quite men' are, today, referred to as the *Hijra*, a term, which in post-colonial India has become a derogatory word used to emasculate the masculine cis-heteronormative male. Though the transgender/hermaphrodite/intersex person (*Hijra*), also legally bracketed as the 'third gender', is culturally the most visible entity in India, they too are socially shunned and ostracised as being outside of the binary normative. While the rural space could be a heterotopic haven for gay men in India, where the optics give evidence of *kothis* (effeminate bottom role playing men), *panthis* (masculine top role playing men), *laundas* (effeminate male dancers), lesbian women are either ghosted, villainised and erased (with violence) or opt for heterosexual marriages, as researched by Bakshi and Dasgupta (2019: 23, 78) in their book *Queer Studies: Texts, Contexts and Praxis*.

The Epistemic Erasure of the Lesbian Identity

Books from the elite Brahmanical Great Traditions, such as the *Dharmashastras* and the *Manusmriti*, which proposed harsh punishments for queerdom were promoted, and texts from the Great and Little Tradition which embraced same sex relations such as the *Kamasutra*, the *maitri karar*, a form of marriage between women and the exquisite same sex iconography in the Tara Taratini temple of Orissa were erased (Thadani, 2016: 2). Giti Thadani, in her book of essays, *Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India* (1996), walks us through evidence of the existence of same sex love (lesbian love; women loving women) right from the Pre Vedic, the Vedic, the Brahminic to the *Shaktic* period, with citations from temples, epics and mythologies. However, Thadani opines that all acts involving women loving women were only effable through male divine intervention. Books like *Sakhiyani* (Thadani, 1996) and *Same Sex Love in India* (Vanita and Kidwai, 2001) have given ample evidence of the existence, as well as the proscriptive erasure, of women from ancient times till modern times attempting to exercise their sexual identity, and their desire for women. Terms like *sakhi* and *sakhiyani* (friend and girlfriend) desexualises the act, stopping it from transgressing into homosexuality, restricting it to a safe homosociality, the close affinity and affection shared by women in the *zenana* or the *rasoi* (a private inner sanctum or kitchen occupied *only* by women) in the Global South (Sedgwick and Koestenbaum, 2016).

The orientalist discourse and colonial law have had an imminent effect on the current forms of lesbophobia and homonegativity. Towards the end of the 20th century, the fight for rights of women-loving-women (the term lesbian has not taken root in most of India except for the metropolitan urbanised cities) had been elevated with news reports of multiple women-loving-women either running away from home or committing suicide, especially in the rural areas of states like Kerala, Uttar Pradesh and Bengal. While activists, primarily belonging to the privileged class and caste, continued the good fight in cities, women-loving-women in small towns and villages of India were being 'honour killed' by male family members or forced into heterosexual marriages (Thadani, 2016: 101-113). Janaki Nair and Mary E. John, in their research article "A Question of Silence: The Sexual Economies of Modern India" had challenged the "conspiracy of silence regarding sexuality in India, whether within political and social movements or in scholarship" (Nair and John, 1998: 1). Many women came forward (some with the clause of secrecy) to speak to various female activists who had started forums for lesbian support and visibility like Sakhi (founded by Geeti Thadani, Delhi), LABIA, a queer feminist collective (Mumbai), but only in urban cities. Unfortunately, the urgent and constant glorification of procreative cis-

heteronormative sexual act was further fortified as the only normative one by completely desexualising the act of women loving women. While Eurocentric critics in the 1990s like Adrienne Rich and Lillian Faderman considered sexuality as a secondary aspect of same sex love, this desexualisation of lesbianism was unacceptable even to earlier critics in the Global North like Anne Koedt and Ellen Levine, as seen in *Radical Feminism* (1973). According to Ruth Vanita (2000), an Indian literary academician and queer theorist, such denigrations of sex and procreation are often read today, especially by some feminists, as evidence of misogyny and body hating aesthetics.

This study attempts to throw a spotlight on the unprivileged and marginalized characters in poor urban and rural India by analysing the characters in *Loving Women: Being a Lesbian in Unprivileged India* (henceforth stated as *Loving Women*), where Maya Sharma has provided a fertile arena for analysing the intersectionality of gender, class, caste and most importantly, the sexual identity of these women-loving-women, within a postcolonial context. The multiple protagonists, young and old, rebelling and accepting, revealing their struggles with the limitations imposed on them due to the monolithic understanding of oppression, demonstrate how overlapping systems of power contribute to the blinding or ghosting of these subaltern lives. Their poverty is visible, their caste is visible, but their choice of a mate or partner is rendered invisible due to their double marginalisation as women (gender) in love with women (sexuality).

The Indian Sexual Subaltern in Maya Sharma's *Loving Women*

The 1990s drew attention to a vast spectrum of sexual dissidents who attempted to become visible to the mainstream feminists, especially in the metropolitan cities of India (Kapur, 2024: 1). These voices were pushing against the heteronormative framework that the feminists comfortably worked within. Then, the sexual subalterns were the voiceless gays, lesbians, sex workers, transgenders and folks who did not/do not fit into the paradigm of the parochial sexual cis-heteronormativity. Even juridical reforms were structured to alleviate troubles of and give justice to the female victim, whose sexual perpetrator was always the dominant male subject, a comforting binary (MacKinnon, 1982). As per Ratna Kapur, who uses the example of the sex worker as the subaltern who raised their voice from the margins to create a space for sexual alterity and protection under the law, "it [the sexual subaltern] is also an analytical device intended to unearth, expose, and challenge these very norms [of] binary categories" (Kapur, 2024: 6). Academics and activists who perform within the gambit of 'queer politics', however, rope in intersectionality of class, caste, religion and gender, thereby assimilating the struggle of the non-normative sexual subaltern within a more acceptable

struggle. The *unprivileged lesbian* is the subaltern who cannot speak because she is not allowed to (lacking voice or agency), or because she lacks the language for it. Gayatri Spivak's (1988) influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", which had laid emphasis on how the voices of the marginalised had been silenced, especially in colonial and postcolonial contexts, remains valid to this day. At the same time, the intersectionality theory introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw helps fortify the complexity of the subaltern's erasure by offering a framework to analyse how various axes of identity—such as gender, race (caste, in the case of India), class and unspoken or unseen sexuality—interact to create unique and nuanced forms of oppression that cannot be understood in isolation. Yet, it needs to be emphasised that the voice of the sexual subaltern in India is largely heard through the writings and works of the privileged (as seen with Gayatri Gopinath, Nivedita Menon, Maya Sharma: all upper class Brahmin women), which amplifies Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?"

The author of the primary text, Maya Sharma, herself a feminist and an LGBTQ+ activist, is currently the Programme Director of Vikalp Women's Group, a grassroot organisation in Gujarat that works with tribal women and transgenders. Sharma began her work as a feminist in the capital city, Delhi, and later moved to Gujarat to work with the oppressed women in its rural and suburban areas. Sharma has mentioned her own fears on being outed as a lesbian through her days of feminist activism. In the introduction to her book *Loving Women* she worries about the effect her sexuality would have on her work as a feminist and on her relationship dynamics with other feminist workers, not just in the elite circle, but also at the grass root level. Sharma had the privilege of upward mobility due to her upper class and caste status, a privilege that she was very aware of. This privilege, however, did not minimise her fears of being outed and rejected. Despite these fears, she has continued the good fight for justice and to give a voice to the lesbian from the oppressed classes. The author chose to tread within the hidden spaces of liminality created by the protagonists.

Though ghosting of lesbians has been a very common technical tool used by creative writers to counter their own anxiety, Maya Sharma has always attempted to unveil the reality of women who love women in the marginalised and invisible class, as also evidenced in her last published book *Footprints of a Queer History: Life Stories from Gujarat* (2022). Sharma's protagonists in *Loving Women* are 'invisibilised' or ghosted not just by their gender but also by their caste, class and sexuality. Frequently, self-erasure is a choice made for one's safety and protecting one's family. In her writings, Sharma has had to maintain confidentiality by changing names, and even locations of these women. The need to remain behind the cloak of anonymity gives the lesbian from the unprivileged

class the security and safety that would otherwise be snatched away violently by the heteronormative right-wing conservative brigade. At this intersection of multiple discriminations, the lived realities of women presented in Sharma's book manifest the harsh truth that the privilege of gender, class and caste in fact makes the term 'lesbian' (a western import) and all its nuances accessible to a certain class of people only, while the unprivileged are either invisibilised, or they resort to self-erasure by blending with the normative, repressing their identity and aesthetic.

Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Unprivileged India (2006) is a lesbian-feminist nonfiction falling under the genre of socio-cultural studies by the maverick Maya Sharma, a feminist who worked at the grass roots with the slum dwellers of Delhi. The book is a collection of first-person narrations of the lived realities of ten women from the most marginalised economic background, living in semi-urban unprivileged areas surrounding the capital city. These protagonists are struggling to survive, while striving to negotiate their desires through the web of heteronormative social construct; they also want to give their love the dignity that it deserves. As Sharma states in the introduction to her book, there were whisperings of intimacy and love between women even in the early 1980s and 90s, but it was only after the loud rupture caused by Deepa Mehta's movie *Fire* (1996), released in English and Hindi, that women, including Sharma, were emboldened to talk of and protest against the violent aggression shown by both, the radical right and the pseudo-liberal left, on gender and sexual identities that did not fit the comfortable notions of the normative. The movie, showcasing attraction between two sisters-in-law who have been ill treated by their respective husbands, was met with a furore of riots, arson and threats to the director and female actors by the zealous right-wing Hindutva groups. The national discourses led by the conservatives deemed Lesbian a filthy western import which would threaten the national sovereignty and negatively affect the purity of the Indian Brahmanical culture (Kapur, 1999). The term lesbian was indeed foreign to the Indian culture, but the act was not. Gayatri Gopinath (2007) refuses to align the postcolonial queer with the upper-class readings of the lesbian as an imported signifier of same sex love. She locates the Indian lesbian woman in liminal spaces that are self-curated and shy of the progressive, urban feminist. The at times silent and sometimes loud characters in the stories of Sharma's book have been subjected to multiple forms of oppression due to their caste, gender, and socioeconomic status; their sexuality either comes as a hidden reprieve in their self-curated safe spaces or is a burden for many. And this narrative stands true till this day.

Sharma begins by claiming in the introduction that she “did not fit anywhere” (7), and yet, through that discomfort she went through the socially and culturally mandated milestones of marrying and birthing a boy child: “To the family’s satisfaction, I ‘settled down.’ Even better, I soon had a son” (7). Following Sharma’s coming-out story in the introduction to the book, the book is a compilation of ten stories, featuring six lesbian or homosocial couples, and four women who have either been oppressed and cruelly separated from their partners. Some have managed to curate a secret safe space, a secret coded language, and a coded understanding to be able to live their authentic selves peacefully, without needing to proclaim their sexual identity to the world, and without creating a turmoil in their social surroundings. The narrative offers a delicate and yet meticulous portrayal of all the lived experiences as the women navigate their social environment, which is characterized by patriarchal values, caste discrimination, and poverty. The lived realities of the sexual subaltern, from the slums surrounding the elite capital city of Delhi, is a daily strife of survival within a deeply hierarchical and oppressive social order, and these tales provide the reader a glimpse through a queer lens to explore the complex interplay of sexual identity and power that plays out to date. Being a Hindu Upper caste, Sharma had to navigate obstacles such as building trust due to the class and caste difference, which were impacting her relationship with these subaltern interlocutors.

Our relationship was very difficult because of our class differences. This was also the time when I was learning about the intricacies of class, gender, and sexuality, and how and where they overlap to create new systems of violence. I realised that class is not just about money—class is culture, class is language. (Dutta and Ansari, 2023)

It is imperative to remind ourselves that Kimberlé Crenshaw deployed the heuristic of intersectionality to impress upon academics the ways in which women of colour and especially those from the marginalised locations would slip through the crevices of mainstream activism and advocacy (Carbado, 2013). According to Crenshaw (1989), a specified case-by-case analysis of the intersectionality framework would be necessary to assess the power hierarchies that impose marginalisation on a group of people. The women interviewed by Sharma are marginalised and oppressed by the social and patriarchal structure through class, gender, religion, caste, and sexual orientation. Though Sharma tries to give them a voice and words for what they have been experiencing through their ‘tamed’ desires, many women refuse the agency to label or assign a sexual identity as specified by the urbanised queer community for what they feel. As Hasina, a woman who loves another woman, says, “There seems to be some previous connection between us, I cannot explain it” (Sharma, 2006: 190). Sharma too, asserts, “Such marginalised women struggling for daily survival had

broken the traditional paradigm of the one-man/one-woman family, yet in no circumstances could they freely articulate their choices" (188-189).

The Sexual Subaltern and the Framework of Intersectionality in *Loving Women*: Analysing the Protagonists' Struggles

Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory posits that individuals are not merely shaped by one aspect of their identity, but by a multitude of interconnected social categories such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, leading to unique forms of discriminations, as explicated in the article co-authored by Crenshaw in *Du Bois Review* (Carbado et al. 2013). In the context of Indian literature and postcolonial theory, intersectionality has become a useful tool to examine how various social categories—such as caste, religion, gender, and class—intersect and impact the subaltern experience. The intersectionality framework not only captures the lived realities of the characters in the various stories, but also the life of the dominant caste author and her unique experience of decolonising the subaltern actors' lesbian experiences. While there may be a similarity in the oppression faced by the author and protagonists due to the erasure of their sexual identity, the similarity ends where the author has had the privilege of education, class, caste, and the agency to voice and act.

Ironically, queer activism in India is discredited due to the unspoken but very evident dominant (Brahmanical) caste supremacy within the queer community, which conveniently blinds itself to the existence of caste and class oppressed queers. As Nishant Upadhyay (2020: 467) declares, "homophobia, hijrophobia, and transphobia in India are not just a byproduct of British colonialism, but are also a manifestation of Brahminical endogamic structures." This Brahminical homogamy and endogamy persists through the queer community. "Intersectionality: Mapping the movements of a theory" validates this aspect by applying Crenshaw's analysis of 'marginalisation within the marginalised' with the quote, "at the same time, [Crenshaw] placed into sharp relief how discourses of resistance, e.g., feminism and antiracism, could themselves function as sites that produced and legitimized marginalization" (Carbado et al., 2013: 304).

1. **Religion, Caste, and Gender:** Though Sharma has anonymised characters who were unwilling to be outed, the reader is made aware of their caste and class status. There are characters from the religious minority community, viz., Muslims and Christians, in these narratives. These women have a complex relationship with their religion and their caste; caste is too deeply interlinked with their existence to be just erased by conversion, as expressed

by Mary (chapter 8), "Though we are Christians, we are *adivasis* and continue to live by some of our *adivasi* practices" (161). Mary, a pseudonym, by context is a Christian woman from a very underprivileged background. Mary is described as a 'stoic' person who has accepted her fate, which is reflected in her account, "I have no choice but to play the part scripted by fate" (157). A mother of five, she has birthed her first at fifteen, living with a physically and financially abusive husband who cheats on her, berated by her children, working in a factory in her middle age to provide for her family. She has tried to erase herself through attempted suicides.

Mary's struggle against the caste system is compounded by her gender and her newly explored homosociality, which she is afraid to label as anything other than friendship. The terms she uses are 'friend' and 'fast friend.' While her lower-caste identity restricts her social mobility and access to education, her status as a woman places additional barriers in her way. She is treated as an object of patriarchal control and subjected to violence and exploitation by her husband, her son, and the self-proclaimed patriarchs of her village. Though she escapes from the abuse of the domestic sphere by becoming a labourer, she must keep fighting for access to love. But she is hopeful. Juhi (chapter 9), a Christian, married a Hindu Dalit for love. He was an activist in the Dalit Movement, a marginalised man who used his gendered masculine power to abuse his wife for not birthing a male child. She had loved and lost a woman during her school days and, as was the norm, was forced to marry a man.

2. **Economic Marginalization and Sexual Identity:** In addition to caste and gender, these women are subjugated further due to their economic status, which is below the poverty line. Their access to basic resources is limited by their class as well as their caste. The intersection of these identities always keeps them at a disadvantage; however, there is Vimlesh (chapter 3) who breaks norms, chooses her own aesthetic and works in a male dominated factory. She is unable to break free from the cycle of poverty, because her intersecting identities keep her in a position of disadvantage. This economic marginalization is not just a product of class alone but is influenced by both her gender and caste, as she lacks the social capital and resources that could help her escape. Vimlesh is just one example of the numerous women, including the heroines in this book, who struggle through poverty. Hence, sexuality and desire become tertiary needs or are nullified.

3. **Resistance, Violence and Agency:**

Vimlesh also gains agency by resisting through her aesthetic style, which is manly. She boldly lives her life as she pleases despite her economic distress. She asserts, "In the factory no one mocks me to my face. I am not bothered by others' opinions... From the beginning, I have dressed in this way, like a man. And I have always preferred women" (77).

Though the term lesbian is unknown to her, she is not about to either fret about her identity or her desire. The unprivileged women of rural and urban India had not had their minds colonised and, hence, did not feel the need to have access to the English language to be able to express their desire for each other. According to Vimlesh, it is what it is, and she has accepted herself as such without worrying about other people's opinion. But this heroine is a unicorn who posits, "Why create categories, such deep differences between male and female?" (77)

Sharma, through all these stories, reflects and opines on the fact that despite having the illusion of agency and resisting the norms of this deeply conservative and regressive society, even a unicorn like Vimlesh must find solace in "stolen moments, brief trysts on terraces" (83). The lesbian is safe as long as they silence their desires.

Mary (chapter 8) faces resistance not just by the men, but also by the women who resort to name-calling and want her and her friend to be separated. Mary's *angst* (which resonates among all others) is painfully reflected in her heart-breaking words: "What hurts is that there is no space for women like us even in a group like ours. It is here that we dream of reforming society and changing the world... and it is in this very place that we face opposition" (165).

Juhi (chapter 9) has three daughters, is a single parent, and proudly proclaims, "All my daughters are lesbians. Oh Yes! I know the word 'lesbian.' So do my daughters" (171). Though, the unprivileged recognise their own unsaid desire, they are also aware that it is unacceptable to the normative patriarchy and needs to be kept behind blinds. Sharma, who worked in an NGO that promoted feminism and fought for the rights of women, too, was discriminated against and was asked, not to disclose either her sexual identity or her activism for 'women who loved and desired women.' This impotency that is imposed on the 'other' is acutely felt in Sharma's interview for the IDR (2025), where she emphasised on how speaking openly about the

sexuality of the economically backward class was deemed unwarranted and unnecessary.

The Indian Sexual Subaltern: Does She Desire Visibility?

The Indian subaltern is typically defined as those who exist on the margins of society—often the Dalit communities, rural populations, and women. In India, caste is one of the most enduring endogamous systems of social stratification created by the Brahminical hegemony, with Dalits occupying the lowest rungs of social hierarchy, and being treated as subhuman. Gender also plays a crucial role in shaping the lives of women, especially those from marginalized, oppressed communities. Economic deprivation and the desperation to provide sustenance for the family adds to these women's subaltern burden. These intersections create a unique form of multiple oppressive state for the lesbian subaltern, from whence they are unable to have a voice, or choose not to have a voice in order to be allowed survive.

The heroines in Sharma's compilation are acuminated by their obfuscation in queer activism. This occlusion is due to their positioning on the axis of caste and class, along with layered marginalisation of gender and sexual identity. Many of the characters in Sharma's compilation felt that their sexuality was safer behind closed doors, invisible to the dominant oppressor. Sharma's heroines are oppressed by class, gender, caste, and sexual identity. While many of these women live in the slums of urban and semi urban areas, most of them are migrants, tribals who are economically hard-pressed and are seeking a living in these cities. These differentials, add to the framework of intersectionality, which is an ever-expanding heuristic that can be very well used to create an understanding and collaboration between two grudging resistances fighting the same power structure, based on their "commonalities" while 'acknowledging their differences" (Carbado et al., 2013: 306). Thus, a converted Christian tribal and a Hindu from the oppressed caste may be analysed using the same heuristic. Sharma, through her activism and writings, has been consistently using the 'intersectional lens' to explore "perspectives of both privilege and victimhood, and thereby creat(ing) a connection around shared experiences of discrimination, marginalization, and privilege" (306). For Sharma, extracting these narratives from 'obfuscation' and giving them a voice was an intensely inward looking endeavour; despite belonging to the class and caste that privileged her with upward mobility, her sexual orientation converged at the above-mentioned intersections (Bakshi, 2019: 84). Ratna Kapur (2000), in her study titled *Too Hot to Handle: The Cultural Politics of Fire*, challenges the position of the female lesbian characters being portrayed as victim, and turns around the debate to the

ruptures caused by these characters in the cultural, familial and sexual tropes propagated by the hegemony in India.

Similarly, the subaltern voices of Sharma's collection of lived experiences do not always present themselves as victims; there are those who have settled into peaceful homosociality with their partner, by not being 'out' to society, but being satisfied with the time they get with each other. Yet, it cannot be denied that most are dragged into victimhood, pulled to the fringes by her own kind, while also being pushed by the oppressive heterosexual normative. She is four times oppressed—first, by her class, second, by her gender, third by her caste and fourth, by her transient sexual identity. This sexual identity is viewed with disgust by cis-heteronormative women who follow the binary code and find fulfilment in the institution of marriage and motherhood. While the protagonists of the iconic movie *Fire* defy society and assert their love, the consequence is purification of society by fire (Kapur, 2000). This assertion is a sign of privilege. However, the protagonists of Sharma's book have neither agency nor voice for defiance, nor do they seek it. They seek oblivion, not because they want it, but because it is safe.

Their multifactorial oppression reflects an intersectional experience, as the societal discrimination she faces cannot be reduced to one form of marginalization. Her caste restricts her access to resources, while her gender exposes her to sexual violence, domestic abuse, and her sexuality effects social exclusion. Such overlapping identities cannot be understood in isolation. For Indian lesbian women oppression is the combined impact of their gender, class, caste, and sexuality that shapes their lives. For some this means, making her a subaltern, leading to a unique form of disenfranchisement which slowly erodes her very existence, hence making her invisible, without a voice, without agency. Today, a quarter century into the millennium, women-loving-women in the unprivileged sectors of India, oppressed by multiple marginalisations, choose survival and security over voice and sexual agency. Homosociality has become a way of life among many of these women, and this relationship is safe as long as the underlying sexual intent is not expressed openly. Women-loving-women in rural and semi-urban India create liminal spaces within the heterosexual gambit of the marital home, thereby occluding themselves from the hegemonic male gaze and heterosexual patriarchy, as proven by the protagonists of Sharma's lesbian narratives. This is their voiceless and invisible protest against the culling of their disorderly love. The Indian lesbian subaltern may not see herself as a victim to be liberated by the dominant feminist politics, but as a subversive dissident who has created, as Leela Ghandi argues quoting Monique Wittig, a distinct liminal space for the production of her lesbian desire (Gandhi, 2006: 92).

works cited

- Bacchetta, Paola (2004), "When the (Hindu) Nation Exiles Its Queers," *Social Text*, 22.4: 141-166.
- Bakshi, Kaustav and Rohit K. Dasgupta (eds.) (2019), *Queer Studies: Texts, Contexts, Praxis*, Hyderabad, Orient, BlackSwan.
- Carbado, Devon, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Vicky Mays and Barbara Tomlinson (2013), "Intersectionality: Mapping the Movements of a Theory," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10.2: 303-312, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X13000349>
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé (1989), "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1: 139-167.
- Faderman, Lillian (1981), *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, New York, William Morrow.
- (1991), *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-century America*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Gandhi, Leela (2007) "A Case of Radical Kinship: Edward Crapentaer and the Politics of Anti-Colonial Sexual Dissidence," *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*, Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharya (eds.), Calcutta, Seagull Books: 91-92.
- Gopinath, Gayatri (2007), *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- Dutta, Debojit and Halima Ansari (2023), "Interview with Maya Sharma: A Lesbian and Feminist Activist," *IDR India Development Review*, <https://tinyurl.com/y825nfve>
- Jain, Dipika and Oishik Sircar (2024)(eds.), *Desire and Its Discontents: Queer Politics in Contemporary India*, New Dehli, Zubaan Publishers.
- John, Mary E. and Janaki Nair (1998) (eds.), *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India*, New Dehli, Kali for Women.
- Kapur, Ratna (1999), Cultural politics of Fire. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34.21: 1297–1299, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4407992>
- (2000), "Too Hot to Handle: The Cultural Politics of 'Fire.'" *Feminist Review* 64.1: 53-64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/014177800338963>
- (2024), "Multitasking Queer", *Desire and Its Discontents: Queer Politics in Contemporary India*, Jain, Dipika and Oishik Sircar (eds.), New Dehli, Zubaan Publishers: 1-29.
- Koedt, Anne and Ellen Levine (1973), *Radical Feminism*, Chicago: Quadrangle Books.
- MacKinnon, Catherine (1982), *Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory*, 7 Signs, 515.
- Mehta, Deepa (dir.) (1996), *Fire*, Kaleidoscope Entertainment.

- Narrain, Arvind (2004), *Queer: Despised Sexuality, Law and Social Change*, Nepal, Books for Change.
- Navtej Singh Johar and Ors vs. Union of India (2018), *Privacy Law Library*, <https://tinyurl.com/y9uxabsh>, accessed on 09 July 2025.
- Pattanaik, Devdutt (2014), *Shikhandi And Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You*. New Delhi, Zubaan, Penguin Books.
- Puar, Jasbir (2007), *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham, Duke University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822390442>
- Richardson, Diane (2015), "Rethinking sexual citizenship," *Sociology*, 51.2: 208-224, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038515609024>
- Sedgwick, Eve K. (2016), *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Sharma, Maya (2022), *Footprints of a Queer History: Life Stories from Gujarat*, New Delhi, Yoda Press.
- (2006), *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Unprivileged India*, New Delhi, Yoda Press.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1988), "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), Urbana, University of Illinois Press: 271-313.
- Sukthankar, Ashwini (1999), "Introduction," *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, A. Sukthankar (ed.), New Delhi, Penguin: ix-xx.
- (2000), "For People Like Us," *Translating Desire*, Birin Bose (ed.), New Delhi, Katha.
- Tellis, Ashley (2012), "Disrupting the Dinner Table: Rethinking the 'Queer Movement' in Contemporary India," *Jindal Global Law Review*, 4: 142-158.
- Thadani, Geeti (2016), *Sakhiani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India*, Calcutta, Bloomsbury India.
- Union of India (1860), Section 377: Unnatural Offences in the Indian Penal Code, *Indian Kanoon*, <https://tinyurl.com/y36tffhx>
- Upadhyay, Nishant (2020), "Hindu Nation and Its Queers: Caste, Islamophobia, and Decoloniality in India," *Interventions*, 22.4: 464-480, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2020.1749709>
- Vanita, Ruth and Saleem Kidwai (eds.) (2001), *Same-sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, London, Macmillan.