Abstract

What, exactly, constitutes a new queer literature in India? This essay attempts to examine this question by focusing on works written in the twenty-first century, with particular attention given to two short stories from the 2012 anthology *Out! Stories from the New Queer India*, edited by Minal Hajratwala: Sunny Singh’s “A Cup Full of Jasmine Oil” and Ashish Sawhny’s “Nimbooda, Nimbooda, Nimbooda.” Intended as neither a legal nor a historical study, this essay considers the interplay of literary cultural production and real-world, watershed events. Through asking questions such as “What is ‘new’ about these twenty-first century works?” and “How are they ‘queer’?” I seek to map the politics of location in Singh’s and Sawhny’s texts. More generally, I consider contemporary queer Indian literature, particularly with regard to its focus on what I would term “visible-invisibility”—the contradictory, complex, time-and-place-specific discourses that construct queer Indian subjects across diverse religious, gender, and community contexts.¹

Keywords: Queer, Indian, Contemporary, Literature, *Out* anthology

Contested Locations: The Question of Queer Indian Literature and Historical Contexts

An exploration of what is “new” about new queer Indian literature requires a brief historical sketch and a clarification of what is meant by “queer” in an Indian context. Given India’s complex pre-and-colonial past and legacy, the question of “queerness” is necessarily a vexed one. It requires a recognition of both the intolerance of non-normative genders and sexualities, which may be understood as a relic of colonialism, and the circulation of expansive understandings of society and individual lives in ancient and medieval Indian writings. India’s laws and their effect on queer lives have owed much to British colonial rule. So, for example, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code carried over a colonial-era 1861 law that deemed “carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal” illegal. The ways in which colonial law influenced and continues to influence postcolonial cultural-nationalist formulations with regard to gender, religion, class, and caste, as well as sexuality, is the subject for entire books. However, one of the aspects of this influence pertinent to my discussion is the loss of plurality that was historically a feature of belief systems and, indeed, literary and lived practices of precolonial India. This is not to point to any kind of utopian state,

¹ I would like to extend a special thank you to Rulmini Panda and Anneli Strutt.
of course, but rather to the fact that ancient and medieval texts reveal more flexible societal structures and non-normative lives than those in place after Independence.

Here the work of queer literary and cultural critic, writer, and translator Ruth Vanita has been particularly influential. She explains, “British nineteenth-century administrators and educationists imported their generally anti-sex and specifically homophobic attitudes into India. Under colonial rule, what used to be a minority puritanical and homophobic voice in India became mainstream” (11). This statement, while sweeping, illustrates one of the main impetuses behind the evolution of queer studies and more generally, queer writing in India: a vivid recuperation of India’s precolonial queer past.

Article 377 of the Penal Code, which continued to be enforced until 2009, when provisions outlawing consensual sex between adults in private were struck down by the New Delhi High Court, was struck down by the Supreme Court on September 6, 2018. The ruling represents a major victory for queer activism. It is indicative, as the court observed in its ruling, of “changing times.”

While there has been a shift in public opinion regarding the acceptance of queer rights, conservative voices within the country continue to frame queer communities and individuals as something alien to “Indian culture” and a corrupting product of “Western influence.” Contra to this homosexuality-as-Western-disease discourse, influential scholars such as not only Vanita, but also Saleem Kidwai, Giti Thadani, and Devdutt Pattanaik have established that plurality and liminal states have historically been productive of queer tales that are imbricated in Indian cultural history. Very often undertaken in response to conservative efforts, these scholars’ projects seek to show how the queer has always been present in the fabric of Indian society, even as what that means has changed over the centuries. This body of work has been extremely important in interrupting modern discourses that seek to alienate queer communities in India from their own cultural roots, and while these projects have been critiqued as exercises in retrospective reading, they remain crucial in maintaining a multiplicity of canons.

While these projects differ in scope and subject matter, their common interest lies in examining the subcontinent’s varied “classic” literary texts, both secular and religious. One of the first instances of Indian scholarship of queer recovery is Gita Thadani’s Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India (1996). It is an important collection but as Vanita points out, “is flawed by its erasure of medieval, especially Muslim materials” (10). In 2000 Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai published Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History, which is now considered a foundational text in Indian queer studies. Vanita has also edited a number of other similar works; Devdutt Pattanaik’s The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore (2002) is another example of this genre.

Some of the fictional texts these scholars examine and/or translate were produced under restrictive social conditions and therefore, with few exceptions, relied heavily on subtext, subterfuge, and reading against the grain. One example of an early twentieth-century queer

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2 These include Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society (2001) and Love’s Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West (2005).
literary work is the collection of Urdu short stories *Chocolate* (1927) by Pandey Bechan Sharma, which Vanita translated in 2009. Sharma writes with remarkable candour and passion about male love and relationships, even though his stated intention is moralistic and homophobic—to warn against forming such attachments. For its part “The Quilt” (1941), a short story by Ismat Chughtai (also originally written in Urdu), subtly describes a young girl witnessing an intimate scene between a woman and her maid. Chughtai was brought up on obscenity charges when the story was first published, but it has since entered the canon and is taught in many university courses in India. Within non-fiction, a canonical presence from the mid-to-late twentieth century is *My Story* (1973), originally published in Malayalam. It is the once-scarandalous autobiography of writer Kamala Das, wherein she describes several of her intimate relationships with women. As even this short list suggests, the history of literature concerning covert or overt non-heterosexual relationships and queer sexualities extends much further back than the establishment of India as a modern nation-state (and certainly much further back than the post-liberalised economy of the 1990s).

It is against this quickly sketched summary that I begin my exploration of new queer literature across a range of genres. Here the term “queer” requires a sensitive and nuanced approach. Indeed, when discussing any aspect of queer culture in India one must recognize the complexities that necessarily attend one’s approach: the vocabulary that tends to be used to describe queerness in India is sourced from theory formulated elsewhere and so is sometimes inadequate in its representative capacity. A vast number of identities and practices fall under the umbrella term “queer” in an Indian context, and consequently I use the term as a flexible descriptor of these identities rather than as a singular or homogenizing marker.

While in the 1980s a number of diasporic writers such as Suniti Namjoshi and Vikram Seth began to publish queer work, the 1990s and 2000s saw a surge in queer writing in India. The early pulp fiction novels of Shobha De deserve mention, particularly *Strange Obsession*.

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3 While most queer Indian literature continues to be written in English, these early examples testify to a linguistic diversity within queer writing that continues into the present day. More contemporary examples include Bindhumadhav Khire’s *Partner* (2005) and Sachin Kundalkar’s *Cobalt Blue* (2006), both published in Marathi (though the latter was translated by Jerry Pinto 2013). Vijay Dan Detha writes in both Rajasthani and Hindi and draws from folk tales, teasing out their often subversive messages. The famous Rajasthani folktale of Teeja and Beeja for instance (celebrating a lesbian relationship) is contained in *New Life: Selected Stories* (2008). While this strand of analysis is outside the scope of this essay, I will briefly mention that writing in regional languages provides a welcome departure from the dominant mode and is also indicative of a shifting politics of place within queer writing.

4 Among these writers Suniti Namjoshi is notable as one of the first lesbian writers to engage with explicitly lesbian subjects. Her most interesting novel is *The Conversations of Cow* (1985), a novel that mixes fable and fantasy as it examines the relationship between Suniti, a feminist lesbian separatist, and Bhadravati, a lesbian Brahmin cow. Vikram Seth remains one of the most visible queer Indian writers, and his remarkable novel in verse, *The Golden Gate* (1986), is partially concerned with the relationship of two male characters, though neither are Indian. Firdaus Kanga’s *Trying to Grow* (1990) is also significant, not only for the fact that the author is from the Parsee community but also because it delves into intersectional issues of queerness and disability.
Out! and New Queer Indian Literature

(1992) which featured a prominent lesbian character.\(^5\) Two major anthologies of note, *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing in India* (1999), edited by Ashwini Sukthankar, and *Yaraana: Gay Writing From India* (1999), edited by Hoshang Merchant, were subsequently published. In some texts queer characters are part of a cast, as in Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe* (2001), which deals with both homosocial spaces and lesbian desire, as four women characters share their stories. One of these stories concerns Marikolanthu (a maid)—significant not only for her sexual relationship with her mistress but for the explorations of the hierarchies of class and caste that play into it. Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman* (2002) is in turn a straightforward narrative about a woman gradually rediscovering her agency and sexuality after tiring of a life ruled by patriarchal expectations. Kapur writes about sexual desire with a notable candour and explicitness. By comparison, Abha Dawesar’s *Babyji* (2005) is startlingly provocative, as its sixteen-year-old protagonist engages in three very different affairs with an older woman, her maid, and her classmate.

Gayatri Gopinath’s watershed critical text, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005), can be read in part as a response to this growing body of work. Concerned with the “impossibility” of female queer desire specifically across South Asian diasporic communities, her critique is relevant to our understandings of queer writing in India as well. Gopinath uses the example of the Indian community in New York refusing to let SALGA (South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association) participate in the India Day parade in the 1990s in order to show the deep discomfort with queer identity that those communities exhibit. This discomfort/erasure continues in many contexts, and we can clearly see a recurring juxtaposition between the notions of the “West” as an imagined escape, on the one hand, and the oppressive “home” of India, on the other hand. To further nuance this argument, most of these stories that deal with “coming out” in locales other than India focus on gay male characters. Does the “impossibility” of queer female desire in the diaspora lead to a silence in literature as well? As Dasgupta notes, “…ironically, this erasure of queer female subjectivity is a feature not only of patriarchal and heteronormative nationalist and diasporic discourses, but also a feature of some gay male and liberal feminist framings of diaspora” (n. pag.).

In the 2000s it also became increasingly difficult to productively and clearly divide writers into those belonging to the diaspora and those living in India. With the movement between countries becoming increasingly easier and Indian publishing becoming more lucrative, there has been a strong trend of writers who have migrated but find it easier to secure book deals in India. With regard to queer texts, the 2009 ruling certainly made it easier for writers to create explicitly and for publishers to print explicitly queer texts. A number of these works could be classified as “classic” coming-out narratives, but what is particularly interesting is how these are positioned and how, in their availability in India, they queer simplistic notions of location, subversion and belonging. In fact, this new queer literature became—particularly in the 2000s—

\(^5\) De’s depiction of lesbianism in her novels relies heavily on negative stereotypes and is evidently deployed for shock value, but I mention her work because it did make an impact on the popular, English-reading Indian consciousness.
one of the ways in which Indianness travelled and circulated transnationally and was appropriated and reabsorbed into other cultural matrices and contexts.

**Out!: Travelling and Transnational Sites**

This travelling and transnational site of reciprocal currents is precisely where we can situate the 2012 anthology *Out! Stories from the New Queer India*. It was published by Queer Ink, an Indian queer portal and publisher that, edited by the diasporic US writer Minal Hajratwala, gives voice to a number of queer Indian authors. For Hajratwala, the desire to showcase possible queer presents and futures is at the heart of the collection’s literary and cultural intervention. In a magazine interview she explains that “certain issues such as lesbian suicide have been written about quite a lot, so we wanted to make sure we offer a more diverse and balanced picture” (n. pag.). Significantly, her words appeared in a mainstream, non-queer publication—signposting not just the anthology’s positionality in the year’s literary output, but a shift in sexuality-related discourse in a public culture context.

The anthology’s politics of location also embody the blurring of the now outdated, discrete categories of “Indian homeland” versus “diaspora,” and work against queer formulations that privilege the diaspora in this now-problematic binary. When approaching such an anthology, the question inevitably rises as to what exactly could make up the stories of the “new queer India.” What is new about these queer stories in today’s India, specifically? The answers to these questions are surely not reducible to just characters or settings, but rather require us as readers and critics to formulate a new aesthetics, whereby we, adapt our theoretical lenses to accommodate emerging forms of writing. It might also be helpful here to keep in mind film scholar T. Muraleedharan’s formulation of “queer.” For him, queer

> empowers a mode of enquiry that refuses the grid of sexual/non-sexual divisions in conceiving pleasures. In other words, it repudiates conventions that classify pleasures as ‘innocent’ and ‘sexual’ or even ‘corporeal’ and ‘spiritual’, highlighting zones of fluidity and blur such distinctions, in order to generate fresh perceptions of human intimacies and corporeality. (71)

*Out!* offers such “fresh perceptions of human intimacies.” Further, through the thematically and stylistically wide-ranging stories that comprise it, the collection also implicitly tackles the urgent need to nuance the critical language and theoretical frames that are traditionally used when dealing with non-Western queer cultures. The anthology is written in English, but certainly troubles dominant and/or Western and/or globalising queer literary models. Thus the new queer writing in *Out!* effectively opens up queer possibilities and modes of reception within and for India’s cultures, cityscapes and literatures. As Dasgupta contends:

> …within the context of processes of globalisation, Euro-American signifiers of queer/non-heterosexual desire are increasingly becoming the blueprint for same-
sex loving individuals across the globe... These include such assumptions as the notion of a unitary ‘gay’ identity that exists in opposition to heterosexuality and hence can only find fulfilled expression through public visibility and departure and separation from heteronormative socio-cultural structures and institutions like the patriarchal family/home...In a global framework, the power-hierarchy between a politically and sexually ‘evolved’ articulate and visible lesbian and gay identity, and other ‘less evolved’ same-sex subjectivities gets replicated through an underlying developmental logic that sees a Western-style ‘out’ lgbt identity as the (only) end point for all Third World non-heterosexual sexualities. (Dasgupta n. pag.)

This point about disrupting a reductionist “developmental logic” about “less evolved” LGBTQ sensibilities is crucial, especially as several texts in the years immediately following the 2009 judgement situated queer desire squarely within the realm of the extended family/home. The value systems sketched out by Dasgupta above would not do these texts justice. In fact, articulated within structures like the family/home/local community, the stories I read closely in this essay—question, sometimes critique, but never completely reject queer desire.

**Sunny Singh’s “A Cup Full of Jasmine Oil”: Locating Queerness in Visible-Invisibilities**

Though Singh’s story is a relatively short piece, it stands out because of the sensuousness and subtlety of its prose. While never explicitly naming the relationship shared by the two women, Anu-di and Vibha-di, Singh does not come off as coy. Instead, the text clearly negotiates with the discourse of the “invisible lesbian” in Indian society, which Gita Thadani and others have discussed. Thadani writes, “In India the phenomenon of lesbian invisibility is linked to the myth of tolerance which makes two contradictory statements: firstly, that lesbians do not exist, and secondly that there is no discrimination against them” (149). These assertions, while written in 1996, still hold true to a degree. In “A Cup” Singh delves into the networks of complicity that allow these contradictions to exist, while also underlining the inevitable points of rupture. The

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6 For example, *The Last Pretence* (2010) by Sarayu Srivasta follows Mallika as she interacts with a dizzying array of characters, including the eunuch Kamala. I would struggle to “classify” Mallika, but she does explore queer desire with another woman, although her central struggle remains with her relationship with her son. Among more contemporary novels, *Perfectly Untraditional* (2011) by Sweta Srivasta Vikram stands out for having a central character who is definitely lesbian. It explores how she came to articulate that identity once she moved to America, in the context of her attempting to come to an understanding with her estranged father. Once again, notions of family and belonging are at the forefront. *The Dark Rainbow* (2012) by Vikrant Dutta, however, seems to slide back into narratives of women finding solace in each other after disappointing relationships with men. Sharmila Mukherjee’s *The Green Rose* (2012) is a coming-out story set within the landscape of Delhi and is notable in its attempt to imagine the repercussions of the central character refusing to marry and explicitly naming her identity to her family and the larger community. While the quality of the writing may be debatable, the novel is almost alone in attempting this narrative, placing it very much in a public space that has proven to be oppressive to any expressions of female desire, let alone explicitly queer ones.
tension between what is unspoken yet understood is maintained and produces a text rich with queer possibility.

Singh makes use of a narrator-protagonist who recounts a childhood episode from the earlier point of view of her young, innocent self. Along with this choice, Singh’s decision to frame from the outside the relationship of two women whom the young girl encounters is subtly suggestive: “They lived next door, Anu-di and Vibha-di. ‘Elder sisters,’ everyone called them…” (96). It is perhaps worth noting that while a vernacular vocabulary for gay male self-definition exists in present-day India, there is no vernacular equivalent for the word “lesbian” (Choudhuri 171). The addition of “di” to Anu’s and Vibha’s names, which frames the two women as “elder sisters” and comes from the Indian tradition of calling unrelated older people by kinship terms such as aunt, uncle, elder brother, or elder sister, simultaneously underscores and obscures the women’s intimacy. Naming the two women elder sisters can be read as a deliberate strategy on behalf of the community to absorb the threat of the queer by replacing it with a safe familial term. Yet, as Singh’s narrative shows, it is precisely from within a family ritual that a queer form of pleasure irrepressibly flows.

From the beginning of the narrative we see Anu-di and Vibha-di linked to each other and the world within a set of finely calibrated yet unspoken assumptions. The now-adult narrator recalls how she perceived the two “dis” when she was a young girl: “I lived next door and was fascinated by the didis: that they lived by themselves, seeming to need no one else but each other… All invitations, for weddings and engagements, births and pregnancies, would be sent to both of them: Anu-di and Vibha-di. The envelopes never carried any last names” (96). Both women are part of the larger life of the community and invited to important occasions as a unit. However, their inclusion is clearly predicated on the careful bracketing off of any acknowledgement of their actual relationship.

The text is marked by silences but the quality of those silences is malleable, changing quite rapidly from that of shared understanding to hostility. The notion of the closet or closetedness as formulated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (which can and often does function quite differently in the Indian context) still seems pertinent here: “a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence — not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it” (3). The narrator as a young girl encounters such a network of silences. Not yet aware of its significance, she tries to puzzle it out. The narrative could have continued in this vein, with the young child being a voyeur-witness to an adult relationship of which she is not part (much as in Chughtai’s “The Quilt”); however, Singh develops the story in a different, much more intriguing way.

The gendered ritual of an older female relative oiling a young girl’s hair is a ubiquitous part of life in the subcontinent, so Singh’s choice of making this act the focus of the short story at once makes the story and the act both general and remarkably personal. It clearly is a ritual in the text, with a well-worn lead up, familiar to all the participants. The older women take pleasure in teasing the young girl with a sexual undercurrent that she does not yet understand. This
suggestive teasing is also a feature of homosocial situations among women in India, and Singh is deliberate in teasing that tension out:

I would want to protest, knowing what was to follow, but something always held me back. There was something compelling in Anu-di’s voice, something dangerous in the soft pressure of her fingers on my shoulders…Her eyes would laugh down at me for a moment, dark with something strange and mysterious, powerful enough to make me slump against her legs. (97)

The tension is only heightened in the description of the massage itself: “The first drip of the oil on my crown would make me shiver slightly… The dreaded scent would wind down to my nose… The oil would squelch and slither… I would hold my breath, waiting half-anxious, half-excited” (98). The choice of words here is highly suggestive, forcing the reader to appreciate the inherent sensuousness of the act, and clearly illustrating the “zones of fluidity” that mark the queerness of pleasure (Muraleedharan 71). The narrator continues: “Then Anu-di’s hands would begin to move through my hair… Her palms would knead the side of my head, moving determinedly down my neck in long, even strokes… Slowly her fingertips would massage my temples, moving steadily to the back of my ears” (98). The power of this passage is disquieting as we are confronted by the powerful intimacy of an everyday act. This process of defamiliarisation is of course an important part of postcolonial and/or queer writing, but in this case, for an Indian reader in particular, the description of the oiling of the young girl’s hair may open up specific spaces of experience that may have otherwise been left unexamined, and in the process engender “fresh perceptions of human intimacies” (Muraleedharan 71).

Singh also plays with spaces in the narrative. The oiling ritual at first happens in public, under the watchful eyes of the narrator’s grandmother, who participates in the teasing and who seems complicit in the larger conspiracy of silence surrounding Anu-di and Vibha-di as well. It is when the girl enters their house, away from public scrutiny that the queer potential of the ritual seems to gain an edge. Singh is evocative in her description of the house: it is “dark and cool… full of strangely feminine things. Lace and glass, soft colours and frills—things that would never have survived in our own more practical household…” (99). It is clear that this a space “of their own,” as it were, and the ritual conducted within it suddenly appears as a threat to the larger societal order, as represented by the grandmother’s reaction as the girl is ordered out of the women’s house: “You! Didn’t I ask you to stay in the house! Get back home now” (99).

The scene between Anu-di and the grandmother is full of significant silences after the initial outburst. Singh once again chooses to nuance this interaction, even though our access to it remains unstable. The narrator recalls, “I walked slowly, trying to make sense of all that remained unspoken in that room. In my grandmother’s face there had been suspicion and anger; now there remained an odd sadness and maybe, could it be, embarrassment?” (100, my emphasis). The question mark after the grandmother’s “embarrassment” lingers. Is it embarrassment at her overreaction or at finally having had to acknowledge (albeit through fear) her neighbours’ actual relationship? The acknowledgement clearly has repercussions, as the
narrator recounts: “Grandmother’s command had broken some magical spell, and I didn’t go over the wall any more… My grandmother insisted in oiling my hair herself, with coconut oil, once a week” (100). By taking over the ritual, the grandmother strives to obscure the ritual’s eroticism. Her actions construct the lesbian relationship as both legible and therefore dangerous, and yet invisible precisely through all that remains unspoken.

“A Cup” closes with the narrator—now part of the adult world and party to its erasures—being once more confronted with the memory of that episode. Significantly, it takes place at her wedding, a presumed entrance into a societally sanctioned heterosexual partnership and another family ritual. Vibha-di and Anu-di still remain part of the cultural life of the community, with the former participating in a very different kind of ritual: “Vibha-di came to apply mehndi on my hands, her sari as crisply starched as ever” (100). Anu-di, however, continues to be disruptive, defying the passage of time; “still in her girly churidaar kameez,” she brings a “heavy garland of fresh jasmine. She smiled at me, only half-mischievously, in the mirror as she pinned the flowers to my hair. ‘Now that you are grown up, you’ll know the scent is an aphrodisiac’” (100).

Here, instead of quashing them, Singh allows any further queer possibilities to linger, and in doing so, allows them to go beyond the purely subtextual and “against the grain” queer readings of earlier decades. While Singh’s short story is not at all explicit and the interaction between Anu-di and the narrator remains in the realm of suggestion, clearly the narrator-protagonist’s account of Anu-di’s words and gestures carries with it a very definite shared knowledge—one that both participants, as well as the story’s readers, must ultimately acknowledge.

Ashish Sawhny’s “Nimbooda, Nimbooda, Nimbooda”: Hyphenated Identities, Bollywood Affect, and the Queerness of Mumbai

In 2005, the year that Gopinath’s Impossible Desires appeared, another critical collection, Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India, was published, edited by Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan. This volume, which in its problematisation of the linkage of queer identities to “Western” influence recalls Vanita’s work, sketches some of the contemporary concerns of the queer movement in India, touching on article 377, as well as other issues. In the introduction Narrain and Bhan ask:

For a country that lives under a Constitution and a penal code modelled on the nations of the West, and which firmly and desperately to be part of a Western, globalised, consumer culture, the larger question is why the “tag” of Western (however wrongly applied) is construed as an invalidation of passionately felt sexual desires and strongly defended identities, only when it comes to sexuality? (16)

For Niladri Chatterjee, the collection demonstrates a “clear-sighted identification of the several fissures that run through the Indian queer movement. Hyphenated queer identities emerge”
Precisely these hyphenated queer identities—not just “traditionally” hyphenated in terms of diaspora, but with “internally” hyphenated, sometimes contradictory sites and positions—prove key in any examination of new queer Indian texts.

One such text is R. Raj Rao’s novel *The Boyfriend* (2003), which remains a benchmark in gay writing. Rao’s witty yet unsentimental treatment of the (then much more underground) gay scene in Mumbai in *The Boyfriend* in particular, has garnered significant attention. The novel is also notable for mapping urban gay life, in extremely explicit detail, onto the familiar geography of the city of Mumbai, which has continued to be a popular site for other such narratives. The text explicitly explores the idea of hyphenated identities as the central character, Yudi, encounters issues of class, caste, and religion in his myriad encounters and relationships with other men. He maintains, “Homos are no different from Bhangis. Both are Untouchables,” and further that “homosexuals have no caste or religion. They have only their homosexuality” (81). His pronouncements are, however, proven false by the experiences of his love-interest Milind, an actual Bhangi, who is not magically granted access to an egalitarian, casteless world, even though he identifies as queer.

As *The Boyfriend* indicates, “place,” and specifically the city in all its reiterations, is an important expressive lens in queer Indian writing. Perhaps because the gargantuan, messy, overdetermined city itself functions well as a metaphor for different bodies/communities that share space, so many queer stories dwell on city life. Here the notion of transgression becomes important, as it links the discourses of spatiality and sexuality. In recent years, the term “transgression” has been used by scholars to question dominant spatial and sexual ideologies. For example, Tim Creswell cites examples of transgression in “normative geographies” in order to “delineate the construction of otherness” and challenge dominant belief systems (9). The phrase “normative geographies” refers to the notion that space helps “tell us who we are in society”: certain spaces expect certain behaviours (Creswell 8). When these spaces are unexpectedly transgressed, behaviour thought to be “natural” to a space is shown to be a spatial/cultural construct.

Rao’s novel, together with the theoretical questions that it invites, lays the crucial groundwork for another *Out!* short story. Ashish Sawhny’s “Nimbooda, Nimbooda, Nimbooda,” a text in which plural or hyphenated identities play central roles, engages with the queer potential of the Indian city (once again Mumbai) through transgressive actions that explicitly disrupt the city’s normative geographies, and in which plural or hyphenated identities play central roles. While the stories in *Out!* cover a remarkably broad range of queer lives in India, “Nimbooda” stands out for its treatment of that simultaneously visible and invisible minority within that umbrella, the Hijra/crossdresser/transgender community. I place these descriptors together not

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7 A similar urban gay aesthetic is present in *How I Got Lucky* (2013) by Farhad Dadyburjor. The work is an irreverent and salacious romp through the entertainment world of Mumbai with gay film stars out to seduce confused journalists.

8 The sociologist D. R. Gadgil defines Bhangis as “… castes traditionally confined to the business of removing night soil. They are on this account considered among the most degraded in Hindu Society” (qtd. in Shyamlal 94).
because they are interchangeable but because each label could be placed on the protagonist Aslam, depending on the context in which he is being described. This is reinforced by the fact that the narrative itself uses different descriptors at different points.

In contrast to the cultural negotiation that still takes place over terms like “lesbian,” “gay,” or “bisexual,” the figure of the Hijra or “third gender” is one that is named and known within traditional societal structures. The participation of members of the community in auspicious occasions such as weddings is considered to bring good fortune, and there is an established tradition of gender-bending amongst divine beings in Hindu religious texts. Even so, the Hijra community remains very vulnerable to abuse, especially as a large number of them have no options but to be sex workers. When in this context the target of violence, Hijras have little or no recourse to be found in law enforcement. Relatedly there is also little awareness of sexually transmitted diseases or support available for treatment. “Nimbooda” touches on all these issues, even as Sawhny casts his protagonist Aslam as irrepressible. The result is a story that is as touching as it is lively, humorous and poignant.

The title of story comes from a “Bollywood” film song, and indeed Aslam is inspired by the aesthetics of popular Hindi cinema, reveling in melodrama and theatricality with an obsession with romantic love. Perhaps this is another feature of new queer writing in India—one that finds parallels in contemporary, popular filmic texts. Certain “new Bollywood” films such as Dedh Ishqiya have, as I have argued elsewhere, shown the potential to “subvert and transmute… heteronormative romances” (Palekar 171). The story “Nimbooda” transfigures this potential into an explicitly queer narrative. It touches on the everyday flows between life, Bollywood, and literature in a subversive way by making the protagonist a queer, Muslim individual; the border-crossings in which Aslam engages—and the non-normative, liminal spaces they foreground—are crucial to the story’s frames of reference and reception.

The specific film referenced in the story, Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam, is befittingly full of dramatic scenes with (heterosexual) lovers threatening to kill themselves if they are not reunited, and the title clearly evokes those connections to a Hindi film-watching audience. Indeed, references to Bollywood punctuate the entire narrative and become shorthand for emotional states. Ironically, mainstream Bollywood remains largely insensitive in its portrayal of the trans* community, usually using those characters for comic relief or villainy. Yet while queer audiences

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9 The Trans* community in India is perhaps its most complicated in terms of how queer theory seeks to “place” it, especially since Western categories do not really fit the diversely embodied identities and self-identifications that comprise it. Sometimes these categories are so specific and local that they are not recognised even in a neighbouring state.

10 From 2011 the Indian government has officially allowed an identification other than male and female on the official Aadhar or identity cards being newly issued.

11 I use the term Bollywood in the full knowledge that it is a contentious and unsatisfactory one, and has been strongly critiqued. The film industry, critics, and scholars often prefer Bombay cinema or popular Hindi cinema. However, it is also the most recognised “brand name,” particularly in overseas markets/audiences, and like Osuri, Prasad, Dudrah, and other contemporary scholars, I use it to foreground its massive soft power acquired through the drive to participate in a globalised modernity.
(of which Aslam is evidently a member) continue to feel the pull of cultural works that exclude them, those works can nonetheless function as useful, if ambivalent, paratextual sites for audience members’ engagement with and re-fashioning of their own queer selves (Palekar 158). Aslam’s affinity with Bollywood is significant for two further reasons: he aligns his form of queerness with an industry that is quintessentially Indian, and this linkage further underscores the queer possibilities of Mumbai itself, which is the centre of that industry.

The story opens with Aslam being placed within another minority community in India as his name identifies/marks him as Muslim. He seems to have no conflict with this part of his identity, however, as “His mind flitted from the sombre tones of religious faith to working out his ‘look’ for Saturday night” (351). This intertwining of religious, sexual and gender concerns is a striking feature of queerness in an Indian context, where conflict with religious identity rarely takes precisely the same agonising shape as it does in Western narratives. Similarly non-angst-ridden approaches to the intersections of sexuality, gender and religion are found in other texts as well.12

Aslam is established as visibly different in numerous aspects of his life, including his relationship with his family. His long hair is symbolic of this defiance, and he seems to have won out over convention:

> Nothing and no one, not even Aslam’s dearly deceased father, had ever managed to get the better of the hair situation. Right from the time Aslam had been a baby, he had been adamant about wearing his hair long. Monthly visits to the barber proved traumatic. Aslam’s father would be forced to leave with the shrieking lad in tow, and the whispering neighbours would have more grist for their gossip mills. (351)

Aslam’s love life is tempestuous and certainly scandalous according to his community, yet Sawhny relates it with the same matter-of-fact tone as characterises the rest of the narrative. Majid Shirazi could be any no-good, faithless lover who causes grief to his beloved, and Sawhny’s treatment of the relationship is refreshingly direct and laced with laugh-out-loud moments. Aslam’s attempts at courting Majid are similarly banal yet humorous, as he memorises

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12 In Anuradha Roy’s *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2016) religion and queer desire coexist comfortably for Badal, a temple guide in the fictional seaside town of Jarmuli, who is attracted to a young man, Raghu. Following one of Badal’s daily visits to the tea stall where Raghu works, we are casually told that “After the thrill of seeing Raghu at the beach was over, Badal stood at a food shop near the Vishnu temple, casting his eye around for possible clients, clinking the coins in his pocket” (54). Rakesh Satyal’s *Blue Boy* (2009) also employs Hindu mythology for a queer purpose. The novel traces a few months of the life of Kiran Sharma, a twelve-year-old gay boy who has recently moved from India to Cincinnati. Attempting to navigate through an unfamiliar and threatening world, both within his family and social interactions at school, Kiran begins to identify with the mischievous God Krishna (in his boyhood form). This is a remarkable narrative turn, as Kiran shows how his use of mythology can be very much his own, untrammeled by dogma. Finally, while not specifically falling under the ambit of gay or lesbian writing, Devdutt Pattanaik weaves Hindu mythology with fiction in *The Pregnant King* (2008) to show how queer tales are very much a part of Indian cultural history.
“sex tips” peddled by women’s magazines, “while escorting his Amma to the Chinese dentist in Dongri” (352). Within the narrative this continual placement of the everyday and banal alongside the recognisable physical landmarks of Mumbai (including the indication of Aslam’s lower economic class through the specific signifier of Dongri, located well outside of the urban geopolitical sites of queer visibility in Mumbai), reinforces the already multiple, already existing expressions of queerness within the cityscape. And significantly, this situating gives voice to a non-elite urban queerness.

Aslam’s strategy for wooing Majid back draws on Bollywood once again when he decides to emulate “Aishwarya Rai’s ‘Nimbooda’ look... traffic-stopping red mouth, blue azure eyelids, and hair chicly slicked back” (352). The image is a striking one, even though this love story seems doomed. Indeed, the expected betrayal comes swiftly, striking the first chord of pathos. Majid has been pursuing a woman in order to marry and have children. While continuing to be shot through with humour, the reality of Aslam’s position is clear: “He was someone who never would have the satisfaction of being loved in return beyond the post-coital grunts of ‘meri jaan [my love]’. Had his rival been a queen, the claws would have done the trick... But being cheated on for a younger girl was the worst blow” (353).

Having distinguished himself from his family in the form of his long hair and performative flamboyance, and in his refusal to be conventional or discreet, Aslam seeks solace in a different kind of “family”: his Bollywood heroines. Aslam’s reliance on Bollywood proves to be a coping mechanism, whereby he can claim kinship to the “tragedy queen” Meena Kumari: “He felt a deep, soulmate-like connection with the tragedy queen on the screen: gorgeous, unloved and sozzled” (353). Sawhny’s use of Bollywood as a kind of emotional shorthand for Aslam’s queer and outcast status (to mainstream society) is masterful: Aslam’s fascination for the ever-heartbroken actress calls up dozens of common references for the Indian reader without overburdening the prose itself. By the same token, while Aslam’s death wish may at first seem histrionic, it soon proves to be deeply distressing: “Death meant an acknowledgement. It also meant a full stop to all the world’s cacophony and confusion that rang incessantly in his ears, telling him that something was not right about him, though he couldn’t fathom what” (354).

The climax of the action occurs at another point in the cityscape, at once familiar to readers and tourists, but now also explicitly queered. In this case it is The Wall at the Gateway of India—a “fertile hunting ground for all types of folk, whether the elite gays from Voodoo, or straight men from anywhere” (354). Aslam’s entry into this climactic scene is suitably melodramatic: “He managed to step out, all five feet six inches, clad in pristine white bhartiya nari vastra [in the pristine white clothes of the ideal/idealised Indian woman]” (354). However, the impact of Aslam’s suicide attempt (the latest of many) is lost on Majid; Aslam collapses in

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13 A predominantly Muslim area with a chequered history. It was once a hub for Muslim intellectuals, writers, and filmmakers, and later, underworld dons (Livemint n. pag.).
14 This description also gestures to one of the sustained critiques of the queer rights movement in India, that its focus has been on the elite, urban (male) citizen. Stories like “Nimbooda,” much like Rao’s earlier work, point sharply to the issues of class, caste and religion, along with divides along urban and rural issues that exist within it.
appropriately Meena Kumari-esque fashion, and is rushed to the hospital to have his stomach pumped. It is here that the most frightening realities that underlie queer life in India become explicit as Aslam is almost denied treatment with the reasoning that “Hijra case hai. Sorry [This is a Hijra case. Sorry]” (355). As Sawhny notes, “The authorities of the hospital had decreed that transsexuals, drag queens and hermaphrodites were beyond their Hippocratic realms and did not deserve to be treated. First should the poser be placed in a male or female ward? Then, the stigma and myths surrounding HIV in the third world meant that treating someone like Aslam was inviting trouble” (355). The utter lack of support is also made clear as Aslam’s friend Salim realises that Aslam’s death will mean further trouble from the police.

To be saved then, “Aslam would have to be proven male. Penis and testicles would fulfil the requirements, never mind the consequences” (355). To be deemed deserving of being admitted to hospital Aslam must be stripped naked and de-queered publicly. The violation is stark, especially considering his refusal to bow to convention when conscious. This process of “proof” also brings into question the categories of identity discussed earlier. Aslam does not identify with any of the categories mentioned, of “transsexuals, drag queens and hermaphrodites.” However, as the narrator explains, to be considered human enough to get medical attention the medical practitioners must “ignore what he looked like from the neck up...” (355) and focus only on his genitals. Aslam’s return to consciousness underscores the damage caused to queer lives by such practices, as relief at being alive is damped by the knowledge of his public exposure: “Being unconscious and naked meant that strangers have espied upon his manhood. What a travesty of respect!” (356). While comically expressed, the trauma exacted on his bodily autonomy and his right to self-identification is clear: “You bitch, mujhe nanga kaise rakha? [You bitch, how could you strip me naked?] How many men have seen me? They know I’m a man now!” (356), he cries out to his friends. Aslam does recover to live and love again, “incurably romantic, alive and not quite suicidal” (356), but we are well aware of the tenuousness of his “filmy” queer life.

**Conclusion: Indian Queerness, New Voices and Reciprocal Flows**

The anthology *Out!* signals a shift in the politics of place and positionality within queer writing in India. It emboldens new voices to continue to emerge and take on the important task of writing forms of queerness that arise from and speak back to life in India (and its diasporas). Not conforming to any dominant (read: Western) queer literary models, the new queer writing in *Out!* effectively opens up queer possibilities within and for India’s culture and cityscapes and literature. By presenting different interpretations of queerness within the domestic or family sphere, both Singh and Sawhny are able to address the present contradictions in Indian society: the dialectic of the visible-invisibility of Indian lesbianism structure “A Cup”; the gender crossings foreground questions of hyphenated Indian identities within “Nimbooda.” Singh’s narrative also speaks of hope by mobilising feelings of kinship and connection through the popular icons of Meena Kumari and Aishwarya Rai. The linkage of Bollywood to the formation
and reinscription of Aslam’s queer identity takes on special significance within the context of diverse queer audiences, readerships, and public culture — and the flows across them.

The relationship between literary cultural production and real-world events is never only unilateral, and both short stories illustrate as much in the explicit and implicit questions they raise. Functioning as provocations, they ask (and attempt to answer in their own ways), whether, insofar as the city of Mumbai lends itself to functioning as a queer urban backdrop in several texts, these texts in turn queer the actual city of Mumbai. As an increasing number of writers and readers constitute it as a queer site, does the city itself begin to “accrue queerness” and disrupt normative geographies? Is it possible to speak queerness within the Indian family or community? If so, what might these voices sound like?

Of course, the Supreme Court’s striking down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in September 2018 will not magically wipe out all conservative resistance. Nor will its repeal signal a “return” to some kind of pluralistic, pre-colonial India unsullied by colonial influence. India is necessarily in dialogue with not only its various past societies but also with its present societies, including queer subcultures and their dis/engagement from/with Western queer conventions. As the Supreme Court ruling suggests, homosexuality is becoming less stigmatised in India.

Thus I broach a final point on the politics of location with regard to the interplay between public culture and textual culture: Indian writers of queer texts challenge the norms of stigma and invisibility with which their works have conventionally been met. In India, there are happy endings in real life, including queer life. In recent years more explicitly queer Indian works have been included in literary festivals and community events. The texts in Out! may feature endings that are equivocal, but those endings are neither inexorably tragic nor violent. Importantly, the anthology emphatically demonstrates that same-sex love or desire is not fundamentally foreign to the mediations of pleasure of either Indian literature or its readers; in fact, those mediations underscore queer possibilities within diverse loci. While there is still a long way to go in terms of giving queer people (and particularly queer women) a prominent voice, Out! has played a vital, contemporary role in representing queer Indian lives in all their varied, literary manifestations.

Out!’s appearance in a post-2009 watershed world, has resulted in specific effects, such as an upsurge in well-publicised readings and community events, initially driven largely by the efforts of publishing house Queer Ink founder, Shobhna S. Kumar. These developments also underline what queer communities (literary and other) increasingly expect—a sense of connectedness and a shared creative/literary/performative being in public spaces. An invisibility of queerness in mainstream literature, public spaces, and discourses is not inevitable any more. New queer Indian literature has become a fresh site of reception as well as a stage for the performance of various cultural inflections of queerness, not just enabling new insights into the writing itself, but also constituting dynamic languages for new queer reading publics.

15 Shared queer spaces in earlier decades largely focused on HIV-prevention and activism centred on men who have sex with men (MSM) as well as Hijras, though there were some lesbian-feminist activism exceptions. Pleasurable, creative, literary, performative activities were largely confined to the private domain, such as house parties, and usually divided along gender lines (Kumar).
Thus understood, the growing, dynamic body of new queer Indian literature becomes a negotiated, locally embodied, yet globalising experience. In other words, I read new queer Indian literature (and readerships) as having a distinct, emergent presence, and a strong sense of place, yet existing in a productive flow and flux with other queer textual literatures and cultures.

**Works Cited**


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