

Queering Feminist Literary Discourse in India: Beyond Heteronormative Womanhood

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Abstract- India's feminist literature has played a leading role in challenging patriarchy, caste oppression, and gender-based violence in the country. Nonetheless, it must be noted that both the literary corpus and scholarly analysis have primarily been framed within the framework of cisnormativity and heteronormativity. The current paper proposes that recent tendencies in the field of queer and transgender literature call for a paradigmatic shift in the feminist literary discourse in India. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, queer of colour critique, and transfeminism, the present study analyses A. Revathi's autobiographical work "The Truth About Me," Living Smile Vidya's memoir "I Am Vidya," works by Meena Kandasamy, and the reception of Akwaeke Emezi's writings in India. A qualitative analysis of the selected texts reveals their subversive nature and highlights the flaws of feminist discourse, which takes for granted the notion of cisgender and heteronormative womanhood. These works demonstrate the need for the consideration of the intersections between such dimensions as caste, class, language(s), sexuality, and gender variance within a new feminist framework. The queering of feminist literary discourse in India presupposes shifting from inclusiveness to transformative knowledge production.

Index Terms: Queer feminism, transfeminism, Indian literature, intersectionality, gender performativity, queer of colour critique, transgender narratives.

I. INTRODUCTION

The growth of feminist literary theory in India has considerably widened the horizon of literary theory by incorporating questions about women's lives, critiquing patriarchal systems, and bringing out the connections between gender and caste, class, religion, and nationality. Nevertheless, even when such literary theories have started recognising issues of intersectionality, they still assume implicitly certain norms concerning the stability of gender identities and heterosexual modes of being.

The notion of "woman" has been used as an all-encompassing subject of feminist theory, leaving little space for trans women, queer women, gender nonconforming people, and non-binary individuals whose existence defies any binaries of sex and gender. In other words, there is a limit to the extent to which feminist theories can be considered progressive because they reproduce cisnormative assumptions about society.

Recent developments in queer studies in South Asia have stressed the importance of reconsidering feminist politics from a trans feminist, queer of colour, and anticolonial perspective. Modern queer and transgender movements in India have been paying greater attention to caste, regional and class dynamics in gender relations. (Sage Journals)

In light of all the above, there is no doubt that transgender autobiographies and queer literary interventions have been important areas of resistance. *The Truth About Me* by A. Revathi and *I Am Vidya* by Living Smile Vidya give first-hand accounts of experiences of gender non-conformity in contexts of caste oppression, poverty, and social exclusion. Meena Kandasamy's literary production brings out the nexus between patriarchal Brahminism, caste atrocities, and heteronormativity. Meanwhile, the reception of Akwaeke Emezi's work in India creates opportunities for transnational conversations on non-binary identity.

This thesis proposes that engaging with queer literature through the lens of feminism entails much more than merely inserting queer authors into mainstream feminist canons.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the research include:

1. Discussing the heteronormativity underlying Indian feminist literary criticism.
2. Identifying how queer and transgender stories subvert heteronormative representations of womanhood.
3. Looking into caste/class/sexuality/gender interactions in select literary works.
4. Suggesting a new trans feminist approach to Indian feminist literary scholarship.
5. Examining the effects of queer aesthetics on rethinking embodiment, resistance, and community.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What subversions of heteronormative womanhood have queer/transgender storytelling made in Indian feminist literary theory?

2. How do caste/class/language intersect with gender nonconformity in contemporary Indian literature?
3. How can transfeminism and queer of colour critique inform Indian feminist literary theory?

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

In terms of current trends in Indian feminist and queer studies, there has been a shift from an emphasis on identity politics to an intersectional approach involving the analysis of issues related to power, embodiment, and citizenship. Dutta & Roy (2020) note that no conception of the experience of being a transgender person in India can be made without considering caste, class, and state. Likewise, Khubchandani (2020) demonstrates how queer identities must be understood in light of their regional and linguistic context. Mainstream Indian feminist research has often been criticised for excluding the voices of transgender women. As noted by Sarkar & Dasgupta (2020), Indian feminisms require the adoption of an intersectional approach beyond additive conceptions to address the exclusions imposed by heteronormativity. According to Yadav & Arya (2023), queering Indian feminism requires an intersectional approach to queer theory itself.

Moreover, anti-caste perspectives have become prominent in recent research within the framework of queer movements. Contemporary queer movements pay much attention to caste as a constitutive aspect of sexuality and gender politics. (Sage Journals)

Autobiographies written by trans individuals are becoming indispensable interventions in this intellectual terrain. Such works defy the tendency to pathologies and claim agency through self-representation. Through their focus on embodied experiences of gender variance, they contest the mainstream literary paradigms wherein trans subjects are constructed as representations rather than active agents of knowledge production.

Even as more literature exists in this field, there are considerable lacunae about using trans feminist approaches in Indian literary criticism. This study aims to fill that void by focusing on transgender and queer narratives in feminist literary theory.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilises an interdisciplinary theoretical framework incorporating elements of gender performativity, intersectionality, queer of colour critique and transfeminism.

Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) continues to be a key text when considering gender as an enactment of a socially constructed category rather than a naturalised one. The theories proposed by Butler provide a lens to understand the challenges posed to normative gender structures through transgender narratives.

Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality helps comprehend how various forms of oppression converge. Gender variance in India cannot be separated from caste, class, linguistic, and religious identities.

Critique of Queers of Colour

The critique of queers of colour recognises how sexuality, race, class, coloniality, and state intersect. When used in the context of South Asia, the interrelation between caste and heteronormativity helps us understand the regulation of bodies and identities.

Transfeminism

Transfeminism seeks to subvert the biological essentialist approach to feminist theory through an interrogation of the importance of transgender experiences in knowledge-making. Transfeminism seeks to transcend feminism by challenging the understanding of gender itself.

V. METHODOLOGY

The study uses the qualitative method of textual analysis based on feminist and queer hermeneutics.

Primary sources include:

- A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me*
- Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya*
- Meena Kandasamy's literary works
- Indian academic literature responding to Akwaeke Emezi's writings

Four thematic clusters have been identified:

1. Bodies and embodiment practices
2. The politics of language and identity
3. Caste/class oppression and social marginalisation
4. Homogenisation, resistance, and new kinship systems

Secondary literature includes recent research articles published between 2015 and 2025, along with relevant literature for the theoretical background.

Difference Embodied in the Self-Narrative of the Trans Body.

The transgender autobiographies subvert conventional notions of the self-narrative in terms of dominant feminism by focusing on experiences of the body that defy the binary gender system. In

The Truth About Me, the author Revathi recounts her experiences of living with assigned male characteristics when she knows she is really a woman inside. The autobiography describes discrimination faced at familial, economic, and social levels while establishing the right to be considered transsexual.

Likewise, I Am Vidya is an account of Vidya's life struggles in an intensely homophobic world. In the book, Vidya reflects on the various ways in which heteronormativity controls the gendered individual in legal, familial, and social terms. It can thus be said that self-narratives are political acts. Through the reclaiming of the self-narrative, the transgender individuals resist and reject the medical and pathological models of the past.

Caste, Heteronormativity, and Queer Marginality.

Caste and gender intersectionality continue to play an important role in the study of queer identities in India. Meena Kandasamy's work highlights the connection between Brahmanical patriarchy and heterosexuality. She shows how caste continuity is achieved through the control of sexual behaviour, marriage, and gender expression. Contemporary research stresses that queer activism in India has been increasingly aware of the importance of caste in gender oppression. (Sage Journals)

Through the stories of Revathi and Vidya, one can observe how class and caste exacerbate gender minorities' discrimination. The lack of educational and employment opportunities illustrates the concrete aspects of gender differences. Both texts oppose universalist feminism by stressing that one cannot separate gender from caste and economy.

Language, Translation, and Queer Epistemologies

Language has an essential role to play in the formation, expression, and legitimisation of gender identities. This is highlighted through the autobiographies of A. Revathi and Living Smile Vidya, who wrote their original autobiographies in Tamil, later got translated into English. Though translation helps make such literature more accessible, it brings up new problems regarding culture-specific details, linguistic complexities, and other contextual aspects. For example, many Indian languages lack adequate vocabulary that would be favourable for non-binary or transgender people. Hence, it becomes inevitable for them to use the language they are supposed to use against them to construct their identities. Through the recontextualization, redefinition, and recreation of these words, Revathi and Vidya transform language into a source of power. These examples prove that the creation of queer knowledge does not happen only through experience; it happens through language.

Transnational Queer Solidarities: Reading Akwaeke Emezi in India

Though the work of Akwaeke Emezi arises out of particular cultural/spiritual traditions in Africa, its reception in India is suggestive of the possibilities offered by transnational queer solidarities that go beyond national and geopolitical borders. The writings of Emezi refuse simplistic binaries regarding gender by foregrounding gender identity as being flexible, multiple, and deeply rooted in spiritual and cultural expressions of the self. In the case of readers from India, Emezi's writings neither provide a universal blueprint nor an exemplary model of gender identities; instead, it opens up avenues for thinking about gender outside of the strictures of biological/heterosexist/ legal frameworks. Reading the work of Emezi becomes important for Indian feminists and queer theorists alike insofar as it enables a rethinking of the inadequacies of established identity formations in Indian feminist and queer politics.

VI. CONCLUSION

Queering feminist literary theory in India entails much more than just broadening the canon to include transgender and queer voices. What is needed is a thorough examination of the premises that form the basis of feminist literary theory itself. The writings of A. Revathi, Living Smile Vidya, Meena Kandasamy, and Akwaeke Emezi's reception in India exposes the inadequacies of heteronormative approaches that are premised on fixed and universal definitions of womanhood.

In their writing, gender is always understood in relation to systems of caste, class, linguistic, and sexual differences. Through this attention to gender variance and difference, they contest exclusivist feminist models of literary criticism. Transfeminist literary theory in India would recognise multiplicity as the starting point of such literary study. Not only would this approach make possible the enlargement of feminist archives, but it would transform the very premises of feminist theory.

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