Queer Representation in Literature and Popular Culture

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Preface

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The book presents a multi-faceted exploration of queer identities, narratives, and politics across literature, media, and popular culture. The collection engages with both Indian and global contexts, reflecting on how queer representation has evolved within these cultural landscapes. The book interrogates how different social, political, and historical frameworks shape the portrayal of queerness. This collection of essays critically analyzes queer sexualities through contemporary narratives, addressing gaps in existing scholarship. While queer studies in India is an emergent area, much of the academic focus has traditionally centered around women's representation, feminism, and masculinities. In contrast, scholarship specifically addressing queer sexualities and trans experiences through literature and media remains underrepresented. In India, legal advances such as the decriminalization of same-sex relationships have paved the way for a more public discourse on queerness, but these debates are still shaped by complex intersections of identity, culture, and power. This collection of essays seeks to fill this critical gap by examining queer subjectivities and representations through the frameworks of gender, identity, history, nationalism, and censorship.

At the same time, the book features chapters that engage with queer scholarship from other contexts, particularly the US. By including studies on US-based media and literary narratives, the book not only offers a comparative lens, but also reflects the transnational nature of queer experiences and scholarship. The focus on these two specific loci, India and the US, allows for a nuanced understanding of how cultural and political contexts shape the articulation and visibility of queer identities differently. The rationale behind this comparative framework lies in recognizing the distinct histories of LGBTQ+ movements in both countries, while also examining the shared challenges posed by heteronormativity, neoliberal politics, and media representation. This dual focus makes the volume relevant to both regional and

global scholarship, offering insights into the complexities and convergences of queer representation across different cultural milieus.

The decision to foreground both Indian and American contexts is intentional, as it allows for a comparative exploration of how queerness is framed, resisted, or celebrated in different socio-political climates. While Indian narratives emphasize the vernacular complexities of gender and sexuality, US-based studies focus on issues such as queer migration, asexuality, and the politics of media representation. By bringing together these two loci, the book highlights the ways in which queer bodies and narratives resist dominant frameworks across multiple cultural spaces. However, recent years have witnessed a growing visibility of LGBTQAI+ issues, especially in light of the landmark events like the decriminalization of Section 377 and the rise of digital platforms as spaces for queer expression and activism. The current debates in India revolve around themes such as legal recognition of same-sex relationships; the inclusion of non-binary identities; queer representations in popular media; and the intersections of caste, religion, and gender. This book addresses these emerging conversations and critically explores the shifting narratives that portray queerness within Indian culture.

The book is divided into three parts: Part 1 – Queer Possibilities: Power Dynamics and Agency in Cinema and Literature, Part 2 – Embodying Intersectionality, and Part 3 – Vernacular Perspectives. Each section examines distinct domains of queer representation that challenge heteronormative frameworks and offer alternative imaginaries. The book aims to critically examine queer representations in twenty-first-century narratives, providing scope to understand and investigate these cultural representations that depict current debates and queer politics.

Part 1 of the book examines how queer identities navigate social spaces marked by vulnerability, nationalism, and systemic inequality. Chapters in this section explore narratives that reflect the intersection of queerness with religion, cultural stigma, and power dynamics. Part 2 focuses on the intersections of queerness with race, disability, and media representation. These chapters delve into complex identities, exploring topics like Black feminist epistemologies, asexuality, and trans identities. By addressing both dehumanization and hypersexualization in media, this section interrogates how queer and trans individuals are represented in global narratives. Part 3 centers on the cultural specificities of queer representation within localized frameworks, such as Assamese cinema and postcolonial literature. These chapters highlight how local stories and contexts frame queer identities, creating unique expressions of desire and resistance that are deeply rooted in vernacular cultures.

This literary work presents a significant contribution to queer scholarship, offering perspectives that are both locally grounded and globally relevant. The comprehensive array of themes examined within this volume will be invaluable for scholars and researchers interested in gender, sexuality, literature, and popular culture, providing a foundation for future research in these areas. By engaging with contemporary debates in India and beyond, this volume invites readers to critically reflect on the evolving politics of queer representation and its transformative potential in the twenty-first century.

Part 1 of the book, "Queer Possibilities: Power Dynamics and Agency in Cinema and Literature," includes four chapters.

Chapter 1 presents a detailed analysis of Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994) and Nemat Sadat's *The Carpet Weaver* (2019). The chapter focuses on the development of social identity and behavioral patterns that affect sexuality. It provides insights on the impact of cultural metaphors on the male body from infancy by projecting queer identities in social spaces of vulnerability in the form of sexual abuse and violence perpetrated by the heteronormative society. It discusses complex ideas like compulsory heterosexism in the context of religion, vulnerability and social inequality, and stigma towards homosexuality.

Chapter 2, "(Im-)Mobile Sexualities and Queer Possibilities in *Angry Queer Somali Boy* (2019) by Mohamed Abdulkarim Ali," presents nationalism and mobility through the lens of sexuality and queer migration studies. This chapter provides insights into understanding a memoir based on transcultural existences in relation to local and global identities of nation-states that are reinforced and protected by state control mechanisms. The chapter focuses on the challenges faced by queer refugees in a heteropatriarchal system, emphasizing their presence and the need for discussion in global literature.

Chapter 3, "Unveiling the Embodied Nexus: Interrogating the Interplay of Queer and Crip Identities in the Cinematic Landscape of *Margarita with a Straw*," presents an in-depth analysis of the film's narrative, characters, and cinematic techniques to navigate the complexities of queerness and disability, challenging traditional notions of identity, sexuality, and bodily autonomy. Drawing upon queer theory and disability studies, this chapter investigates the nuanced representation of the protagonist in the film. This chapter closely examines the film's visual and auditory elements, uncovering how cinematography, sound design, and mise-en-scène contributes to the representation of queer and crip experiences. By analyzing the film's aesthetic choices, this research aims to reveal the cinematic techniques employed to challenge and subvert dominant narratives surrounding queerness and disability.

Chapter 4, "Shahria Sharmin's *Call Me Heena*: Decolonial Heterotopic Space of the Photograph and Representation of the Hijra," focuses on hijra communities

who face extreme marginalization due to their exclusion from nearly all aspects of society. Although the hijras have captured the interests (and imagination) of photographers since early colonial photography, a limited number of projects, like Dhaka-based freelance photographer Shahria Sharmin's *Call Me Heena* (2012-2014), attempt to portray the hijra subjectivity. Through this chapter, it is emphasized that the intimate portraits are an attempt to decolonize the hijras, as these images show a shift from the ethnographic (colonial) eye to a focus on their subjectivity. The photographic space serves as a counter-space that differs from both mainstream society and the sites regularly inhabited by hijras. This chapter focuses on photographing the hijras' journey from Bangladesh to India. Through the simple, dark background reminiscent of a studio, the character de-emphasizes the external elements and dislocates the hijra from the colonial structure of the photograph and reality, instead, creating room for their social structures, practices, and desires to shine.

Part 2 of this book, "Embodying Intersectionality," includes three chapters. Chapter 5, "Liberated from the Binary: An Interrogation of Gender in Rivers Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts* and *The Deep*", focuses on Black feminist epistemologies in *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017) and *The Deep* (2019) that expand notions of racial and gender-based identities. "Ungendering" as a key concept by Spiller is examined in this chapter to present intersectional struggles and project how gender is used by social structures as a mode of restraint. The chapter further focuses on how fracture creates ways to liberate the world through Black feminist embodied knowledge.

Chapter 6, "Trans and Asexual Representation: Between Oversexualization and Dehumanization," offers a brief timeline of LGBT+ representation in US media, with a focus on television and the transition to streaming. Asexual and trans representation share an interesting parallel: Asexual individuals are often depicted as inhuman due to their lack of sexual interest, while trans individuals are frequently over-sexualized and portrayed in a predatory manner. Some of the most positive representations are now emerging in children's television, mirroring the recent surge of strong LGBT+ representation in young adult literature.

Chapter 7, "The Monstrous Rainbow Swastika: The Horror Genre's Queer Nazi versus Historical Fact," explores how the lack of understanding surrounding queer persecution during the Holocaust has led to two significant outcomes. First, Hollywood, particularly in sensational genres like horror, has exploited Nazism to portray queer characters as more frightening and predatory. Second, this has resulted in the rise of the mythical 'queer Nazi' in popular culture, a trope that not only distorts history but also further alienates audiences from the realities of the Holocaust.

Part 3 of this book, "Vernacular Perspectives," includes one chapter. Chapter 8, "Macho Girl to Poster Girl: Precarious Lives and the Heteronormative Social Order in Himanjali Sankar's *Talking of Muskaan* (2014)" explores Muskaan's predicament through the lens of 'precarity.' The paper will attempt to complicate the social processes of 'girling' and, consequently, defamiliarize the safety of the classroom by upholding it as an allegory for the precarious postcolonial nation-state through the trajectory of Muskaan's lived experiences as an outed lesbian.

This volume brings together diverse perspectives from authors around the world, offering critical insights into queer representations and their intersections with popular culture. The editors acknowledge and appreciate the contributors for engaging with a wide range of themes, contexts, and methodologies, and for presenting stimulating arguments that explore various dimensions of queer representations in literature and popular culture.

PART 1:
QUEER POSSIBILITIES: POWER DYNAMICS AND AGENCY IN CINEMA AND LITERATURE

Chapter One

Discipline or Abuse: Policing the Gender Narratives of Queer Identities and Body Image Through *Funny Boy* and *The Carpet Weaver*

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Abstract

Despite extensive research across various domains such as psychology, medicine, and culture on queer identities in South Asia, a persistent gap remains in examining the influence of patriarchal masculinity and heteronormative ideologies on queer bodies. Several cases of sexual assault like Hamed Sabouri's execution by the Taliban in Afghanistan (*The Guardian* 2022) and Sri Lanka's forced anal exams on queer individuals since 2017 (*Human Rights Watch* 2020) are overlooked in the mainstream discussions of gender-based violence. Thus, the chapter focuses on the need to examine gender identity and body fluidity, which are often restrained within the bounds of religion and culture in South Asian discourse. Moreover, it analyzes the socio-political forces or biopolitical forces that shape the configuration of gender narratives, influencing the construction of identity and sexuality. Through Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994) and Nemat Sadat's *The Carpet Weaver* (2019), the chapter illustrates how cultural metaphors and political unrest influence the male body from infancy, creating spaces of inequality. Arjie and Kanishka, the protagonists, embody the scars of societal ideals that subject queer male bodies to violence and sexual abuse. It highlights how heteronormative privilege creates vulnerabilities within queer identities, forcing them into compulsory heterosexuality, driven by cultural and religious markers, resulting in compounded marginalization and inequality.

Moreover, migrating across national borders introduces uncertainty and change in cultural definitions of sexuality for non/normative identities. It escalates through homophobic stigma as the construction of identities is culturally formulated. Thus, the chapter identifies these patterns in which one's body is socially constructed and regulated, adhering to the geo-political specifics and marginalizing their gendered experiences within public and private spaces.

Keywords: Queer Identities, Social Policies of Gender, Queer Body Image, Identity Politics.

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Introduction

The inception of masculinity studies was to contest the linear view of masculinity, which is performed in alignment with appropriate male mannerisms. Thus, questioning the oversimplification of male identity in contrast to female identity compromises its intricate construction. Meanwhile, Rutherford formulates "New Man" and the "Retributive Man" (Rutherford 1998, 28 cited in Hobbs 2013, 384) as the metaphoric portrayal of masculinity. This relates to the repressed social descriptions of masculinity and how the male bodies are consistently shaped by bio-markers aligned with social norms.

These definitions further accentuate the meaning of hegemonic masculinity, which are practices of "socially accepted masculine behaviours and beliefs within a given time and culture" (Bauermeister et al. 2016, 1). As a result, it creates the space of inequalities for men of sexual minorities and their psychological well-being, while these reckonable associations remain an uncharted arena. The chapter, consequently, focuses on understanding everyday negotiations of masculine identifications, which are mostly biopolitical, by the young queer bodies within the South Asian contexts.

The Carpet Weaver (2019) by Nemat Sadat portrays Kanishka Nurzada's journey toward self-acceptance as a young gay boy in Afghanistan, a society that is defined by oppressive religious ideologies and homophobic views on masculine norms. Set during the Saur Revolution (1978), it encircles three locations: life in Afghanistan, exile in Pakistan, and migration to America. It mirrors the internal and external struggle of Kanishka that navigates the cultural repression and identity negotiations across borders. Narrated from Kanishka's perspective, it reflects his experiences of being gay and the complexities of forced displacement and identity formation. Moreover, his relations with Maihan and Faiz showcase the dangers of being gay or *kuni-ha* (a

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Contributors

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focus on Asexuality, intersection, and cooperation of library departments, as well as emotional labor in the workforce.

Sandra Jacobo is a recent graduate of the University of Kansas (2024) and currently serves as a Just Transformations Postdoctoral Scholar at Penn State University. Her research meets at the intersection of Caribbean literature, Black Feminisms, Queer Studies and Popular Culture. Besides fulfilling the dreams of her ancestors, Dr. Jacobo is invested in creating scholarship that celebrates the nuances of Black women and femme experiences.

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