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Vulnerability in Visibility: Queer Adolescents and the Politics of Authenticity

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Abstract: The phobia surrounding liberated sexual identities can be traced back to colonial legacies, where imposition of Western ideals of masculinity marginalized expressive gender and sexuality. In postcolonial India, as argued by Partha Chatterjee in *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993), the major resistance to one's gender and sexual expression is the rampant idea of theocratic nationalism, which reinforces cisheteropatriarchal standards at the expense of excluding identities. Ashis Nandy (1983) notes that both colonial rulers and revivalist nationalists share a disdain for androgynous qualities, an ideal cisheterosexual man portrayed as the epitome of virtue. This landscape, paired with aggressive dogmatism, has since put Indian queer adolescents in a dilemma between "coming out to mockery" or "keep suffocating in the closet," forcing them into a precarious existence. The vulnerability continues to worsen as reactionary chauvinism, under the guise of masculinity, spikes the world. Personalities like Andrew Tate and Jordan B. Peterson have spearheaded such movements, broadcasting themselves as 'ideally masculine'(*Übermensch*). This rhetoric not only dismisses fluidity but also incites violence against those who embody it, thereby exacerbating the already precarious position of queer adolescents. This paper aims to explore how these dynamics manifest in the lived experiences of queer youth, examining the psychological toll of navigating a world that punishes authenticity. Through qualitative references to existing literature, this research scrutinizes the lived experiences of queer adolescents in India, putting into scansion how they often resort to homophobia (and transphobia) as an essentialist defense mechanism against the existential crisis of their social identities. This social opprobrium, in turn, leads to ego-dystonic experiences in them. By situating these within broader discourses of postcolonial identity politics, this paper serves as a literary, sociopolitical, and psychological commentary on hegemonic masculinity, closeted homosexuality, and internalized cisheteropatriarchy.

Keywords: *Queer Adolescence, Gender Hegemony, Internalized Cisheteropatriarchy, Identity, Precarity*

1. Introduction

The historical landscape of gender and sexuality in India reveals a rich canvas from ancient traditions and colonial legacies, profoundly impacting contemporary queer identities. In ancient and medieval periods, Hindu scriptures celebrated androgynous qualities through deities like Rama and Krishna, showcasing a cultural acceptance of fluid gender expressions. Furthermore, the Mughal era introduced complexities, with leaders like Babur engaging in same-sex relationships, further complicating the narrative of masculinity. The arrival of colonialism marked a significant rupture; Victorian moralism dismissed these diverse expressions as 'effeminate,' imposing a narrow framework of hegemonic masculinity that marginalized non-conforming identities.

In the postcolonial era, queer adolescents face a precarious predicament, navigating a society steeped in theocratic nationalism that reinforces cisheteropatriarchal norms. The tension between visibility and vulnerability is acute; as noted by Partha Chatterjee and Ashis Nandy, the ideal of the cisheterosexual man is often upheld at the expense of non-binary and queer identities. This societal pressure can lead to an internalized homophobia that manifests as a defence mechanism against the existential crisis of their social identities, often forcing queer youth into a masking of essentialist demeanour.

The social constructs of gender and sexuality further intersect with racial purity theories, as articulated by Monique Wittig in her seminal work, "One is Not Born a Woman." This perspective aligns with R.W. Connell's definition of colonial hegemonic masculinity, which situates queer identities as inherently resistant to oppressive structures. Inspired by Frantz Fanon’s notions of decolonizing identity, this paper examines how queer movements risk being co-opted into frameworks of pinkwashing, where liberal queerism is weaponized to obscure violent imperialistic agendas. The troubling instances of violence, such as those perpetrated by individuals claiming to uphold queer values, underscore the urgency to disentangle queer resistance from narratives of colonial annexation. Pinkwashing refers to the practice of justifying apartheid and other political injustices by exploiting the concept of liberal queerism. To cite an example, A few months ago, An IDF soldier displayed a pride flag while carrying out a killing spree "in the name of love." In a similar way, large corporations publish advertisements and flyers, carrying messages of queer acceptance, roll them up and throw them away in the closet once Pride Month is over. Strategies like these have ulterior motives and subliminally form an extended part of what Michel Foucault describes as 'Biopower', thus making queer identities a proponent of Colonial and Postcolonial Governmentality. On the other hand, the decolonized queer identity advocates for resistance against all forms of oppression, making it essential to distinguish queer movements from being co-opted as tools of imperialism and colonial annexation.

2. Methodology

For conducting this research, the materials used were obtained from secondary literary sources like existing books, articles, newsletters, papers, etc. Thus, the research is approached through a qualitative method, taking in consideration specialized pieces on related writeups.

3. Identity Formation in Adolescence: Decoding ‘Queer Psychology’

The period of "storm and stress" that individuals experience at the conclusion of latency is exacerbated by societal opprobrium, often manifested in a dereistic manner. This phenomenon is particularly relevant to the discourse surrounding adolescent homosexuality.

Adolescence is widely recognized as a critical phase of ego epigenesis, or identity formation. However, the prevailing paroxysmal and hostile attitudes towards homoerotic feelings—rooted in societal perceptions—contribute to what can be termed "Sexual Identity Confusion." The societal stigma surrounding homosexuality creates an environment in which adolescents grapple with the potential for homosexual self-labelling, often hindered by significant anxiety and fear of social disapproval. This leads to intrapsychic conflict, compelling adolescents to adopt various coping mechanisms. These mechanisms may include compartmentalization of sexual desires, repression, suppression, or, in rare cases, disclosure to close friends or family, or seeking professional assistance. The core issue lies not in the homoerotic feelings themselves but in the entrenched "traditional bias" that frames these feelings as a "psychological pathology" or an inferior sexual orientation.

Homosexuality should be conceptualized as a natural aspect of the self, akin to heterosexuality, both emerging from the same psychosexual matrix. The "illness model" that categorizes homosexuality as a pathology has been extensively debunked by a series of empirical studies, most notably the eighteen significant studies conducted between 1957 and 1974. For instance, research by Meredith and Riester revealed that the classification of homosexuality as a pathological condition lacks robust empirical support. Consequently, in 1973, the American Psychiatric Association voted to depathologize homosexuality, removing it from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. Thus, homosexuality is recognized as a natural developmental outcome that does not imply psychopathology or developmental stagnation.

Homoerotic feelings are frequently dismissed as a mere "phase" or "transient developmental phenomenon" when reported by adolescents. This perspective is inherently problematic and often approached arbitrarily. It is crucial to understand that the establishment of sexual preference primarily occurs after birth, with foundational elements solidifying by puberty. While object choice tends to achieve a degree of immutability by the end of latency, it is equally important to note that homoerotic

fantasies and behaviors do not necessarily predict adult homosexual object choice. Thus, the interpretation of adolescent homosexual impulses as "incidental" is a substantial misconception.

A prevalent misconception among those who propagate social opprobrium against homosexuality is the belief that past childhood trauma instigates or manifests as homosexual urges. This notion reflects both a lack of understanding and a bias against homosexuality. Historically, developmentalists viewed psychosocial ontogeny as primarily a function of intrapsychic maturation. However, contemporary understanding emphasizes that developmental processes and outcomes result from a complex interplay between individual psychological traits and capacities and the specific social context. Current scientific studies have not established any significant intrapsychic differences between heterosexual and homosexual individuals, nor is there empirical evidence to suggest that such differences exist. If one cites tradition in order to uphold their pejorative views regarding homosexuality, it can very well be contradicted through the existence of liberated sexual ideals in historical ethnostates such as the Indian state and the Islamic states.

4. The Landscape Shift for Queer Politics

4.1. Lesbianism and Narratives in the Krittivāsī Ramayana: A Mythological Adaptation Radiating Acceptance.

The legend in our consideration occurs in the commencing canto of Krittivāsī Rāmāyaṇa, entitled ‘Ādi Kāṇḍa.’ Krittivāsa narrates: Forsaking his two consorts at Ayodhyā, Dilīpa embarked upon a quest in pursuit of the celestial Gaṅgā. However, despite his gruelling penance, neither did he discover Gaṅgā nor find relief from his sorrow. Eventually, he passed away and ascended to the realm of Brahmā. With his demise, the city of Ayodhyā was left without a ruler, which caused concern among the gods as it was prophesied that Viṣṇu would be born in this lineage. The gods deliberated and collectively decided to send Śiva to Ayodhyā, who blessed the two queens of Dilīpa with the ability to conceive a child upon union. This boon, thus, materialized as a child born upon the lovemaking of two females, hence was later named Bhagīratha, the one born out of two vulvas (bhagas). However, it was just a lump of flesh, since it was believed in ancient Indian medical science that bone cells are developed from semen. Fastforwarding the events, we find Bhagīratha rendered peerless in beauty by sage Aṣṭāvakra, and sent to the hermitage of sage Vasiṣṭha where he is bullied and abused by a fellow classmate as a ‘bastard child’ for having two mothers. This narrative evidently draws itself from an ancient medical treatise, entitled Suśruta Saṃhitā (II.47), where it is stated that conception may ensue in the womb of one of the two females engaged in mutual coitus upon the union of their secretions. The offspring thus born, however, would be devoid of the skeletal system. Krittivāsī Rāmāyaṇa puts to use this space provided by the treatise as the framework of the myth. In the process, it vividly capsulizes the

predicaments faced by children having same-sex parents and their psychological breakdown, as in the case of Bhagīratha himself.

Analogous in essence, is another tale concerning the birth of the sages Agastya and Vasiṣṭha from the same-sex couple Mitrāvaruṇa. Having its roots in Ṛgveda (VII.xxxiii.13), this legend flowered later in the Mahābhārata (XII.cccxlii.51), Bṛhaddevatā (v.148-150) and the Purāṇas: Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa (VI.xviii.5-6), Matsya Purāṇa (lxi.18-36) and Śrīmad Devī Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa (VI.xiv.60-66) are but a few instances. The crux of this legend is the extraordinary birth of the sages Agastya and Vasiṣṭha from the seed of Mitrāvaruṇa fallen in a pot when the latter two descried the celestial nymph Urvaśī. While homosexual relations are not rewarded with children by Nature, Indian lore, nevertheless, smudges these limitations by stretching the boundaries of Reality and possibility in its unique literary realm. In its rich profusion of myths, it does not fail to vividly envision every 'what if' concept which is cut down by the laws of Nature. Here, Nature does not constrain Love; on the contrary, Nature itself gets toyed with by Love's autonomous volition. This departure is misinterpreted when tallied with natural science, since mythology does not invest itself in cataloguing known facts, on the flip side, it engrosses itself in studying that supernature which transcends the impediments of this phenomenal world. Therefore, the intricacy of queer vocabulary in the vast body of ancient Indian literature stands pronounced. When taken into consideration, the skeletons of these three myths, one can easily gauge that common motif that was yet to be voiced in the contemporary society: a longing for the depiction of the fruit of fulfilment in a same-sex relationship, be it a metaphorical one; and the only way to reproduce the same would be that through the employment of the symbol of a 'child.' A common doubt may arise that whether there is any fulfilment to a love between same sexes, but then again, the very notion of 'fulfilment' is called into question, whether it is wholly spiritual, or one that is approved by the society. Regarding the latter, it is NOT, as can be ascertained in the myth of Bhagīratha, where he is abused and bullied in school as a 'bastard child' for having two mothers, and not heterosexual parents.

4.2. The Unending Boundaries of Love in Decolonized Islam

While one looks at the nuances of various epithets of decolonial masculinity, it is important to take a look at how exponentially different the moral obligations of sexuality were in the Islamic world, compared to those pertaining to Victorian and Pre-Victorian definitions. The period that would be analysed in this context is around the middle of the 8th and 13th centuries AD, the period demarcated as what can be called the 'Golden Age' of Islam. The golden age of Islam is a period not only enshrined with the greatest achievements in literature and science, but also in revolutionary ideas of progressivism, regarding the notions of gender and sexuality. As a matter of fact, one of the first universities, namely University of al-Qarawiyyin (later renamed University of Al Quaraouiyine) was founded in Fez, Morocco, by a woman named Fatima al-Fihri, symbolising a somewhat strongly

consolidated position of women in the then Islamic Society. Upon further introspection regarding marginalized sexualities, one might stumble across the celebrated classical Arab poet during the period of the Abbasid Caliphate, Abu Nuwas (756-814), known for his unbelievably passionate lines about homoeroticism. He was in fact, openly circulated in literary circles until the late 20th century, finding two appearances in the *Book of One Thousand and One Nights* (Alif Laila in Urdu). As Baghdad was the cultural and intellectual capital of the entire Middle East, till the Mongols destroyed it, it is safe to assume that if Nuwas could be accepted as the height of Arabic culture, Muslim societies would be very accepting of homosexuality and other liberated identities. In the words of Saleem Kidwai, in his book Same-Sex Love in India, "Homoerotically inclined men are continuously visible in Muslim medieval histories and are generally described without pejorative comment."

For further context, it is important to cite a few historical references of the Islamic embrace of homosexuality. Mahmud of Ghazni, a towering sultan of his time (971-1030), was actually held up as an ideal for, among other things, deeply loving another man, Malik Ayaz.

In a very popular narrative, Mughal Emperor Babur wrote of his attraction to a boy in the camp bazaar in his 16th-century autobiography – a celebrated work of literature in the medieval Muslim world. This boy, who was famously named Baburi, is often regarded as the emperor's enthusiasm to construct certain structures.

In the 18th century, Dargah Quli Khan, a nobleman from the Deccan travelling to Delhi, wrote a fascinating account of the city called the Muraqqa-e-Dehli (The Delhi Album), which described just how mundane homosexuality was in Indo-Islamic society. At the public bazaars, male prostitutes solicited openly and Khan spoke admiringly of how "young good-looking men danced everywhere and created great excitement."

Till the 19th century, Muslims treated homosexuality as a part and parcel of life, so much so that students were exposed to romantic stories of homosexual love – a position untenable even today across parts of the Western word. Kidwai writes:

Sa'di's (Saadi Shirazi) classic Gulistan, containing stories of attraction between men, was considered essential reading for Persian students. Ghanimat's Nau rang-i ishq, a seventeenth century masnavi describing the love affair between the poet's patron's son and his beloved Shahid, was a prescribed text in schools.

While theoretically Islam did consider homosexuality to be sinful, based on the Quranic story of the people of Lut (Lot in the Bible), the Shariat, the umbrella term for the various legal codes and schools governing Muslim societies, have no punishment for homosexuality per se – sexual relations between

men are outlawed under the larger rubric of adultery. Even then, convictions for homosexuality could only be carried out if the sexual act was testified to by four eye witnesses.

This was such a high bar that commentators on Islam such as Hamza Yusuf have characterised the outlawing of homosexuality in the Shariat as a sort of "legal fiction." Thus, when one looks at history, citations of punishment for homosexuality in Islam is a greatly rare phenomenon to witness.

When one looks at the enriching history of homosexual acceptance in both Hindu and Islamic civilizations, one questions what went so wrong, that both these religions now mostly have a very contemptuous view regarding the entire notion of differing gender identities. What was the process behind the shying away from Nuwas' works, so much so that the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, forced by fundamentalists, had to burn 6000 volumes of his poetry? In short, it could be due to the heavy imposition of the notions of Victorian and Pre-Victorian Morality, as an ideological subpart of Colonialism, as seen in the very fact that the five Islamic majority nations which do not outlaw homosexuality, namely Mali, Jordan, Indonesia, Turkey and Albania, have either never been colonized or have not yet been overpowered by Colonialism.

While the Ottoman Empire worked towards decriminalization of homosexuality in Turkey (1858), two years later the British Raj enacted the Indian Penal Code, Section 377 of which proceeded to outlaw homosexuality in modern-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

So stirring was the influence of this 1860 penal code in India that gatekeeping and revivalistic Hindus continue to hold homosexuality to be immoral and this has led to multiple pleas of same-sex marriage being outright rejected in the Parliament, with lawyers who oppose the idea of same-sex love, presenting themselves as defenders of tradition. A Member of Parliament from the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party even went so far as to claim: "Our party position has been that homosexuality is a genetic disorder." This is quite ironic, given that Hinduism does not even have any textual condemnation of same-sex love (rather glorifying them in certain cases).

It appears as though Muslim and Hindu conservatives, without knowing it, are actually copying the Victorian mores of 19th century colonialism, while ignoring their own history.

5. A Colonial Notion of Morality and Its Bifurcation by Class

When one talks about sexual definitions of England in the past, especially in the Victorian Era (1837-1901), it is but a very one-dimensional concept. It is however, important to notice the role of class divide in this context. The aristocratic notions of morality were vastly different from those of commonplace society. Homosexuality, or rather any slight aversion from the concept of a heteronormative patriarchal ideal was regarded with derogatory eyes, and was studied just to be frowned upon amidst the commoners of England. Throughout history, homosexuals have been defined

by an array of terminologies, and these names were more common during the Victorian era than any other. While terms like Invert, coming from the sexual inversion theory by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Urning or Uranian, from the goddess of Ancient Greece, Aphrodite, who is connected to the planet Uranus, introduced by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, etc, were some explanatory terms for homosexuals, words like 'sodomite', were often used to mislead common people and make them believe that homosexuals were a bunch of people who were having non-consensual intercourse with vulnerable boys. 'Sodomite' was vastly used to describe homosexuals in the 19th century. This was aptly contradicted by French philospher Michel Foucault, who proposes that the homosexual has a distinct personality, which can be characterised by an "'internal androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul.' The sodomite had been a sinner, the homosexual was now a species."

The largest sources of information on the treatment of homosexuals are the availability of criminal records. Homosexuality was viewed as a sin and as a crime. It was outlawed throughout nearly half of the Victorian era in England. That being said, homosexuals being compared to violent and insane individuals and criminals of all sorts "paints a grim and antiquated picture of the 19th century." Moreover, the sole existence of the laws does not illustrate the state of the society that may or may not exercise them. As far as the law is concerned, it was the 20th century that the dark ages began. The number of cases persecuting buggery offences was on the rise in the late 1890s when it constituted 5 per cent of all 'Crimes Against the Person'. Following through the middle of the 20th century, the percentage had risen to 21 per cent. Sodomy was punishable by death in England and Wales until 1861 (1889 in Scotland), as is listed in the Offences Against the Person Act 1828, which came into force on 27th June 1828.

However, the last execution for sodomy took place in 1835, naturally followed by an increase in life sentences. Sodomy was made illegal, or more precisely, all acts of gross indecency in public or in private, by the 1885 Labouchere Amendment (under which Oscar Wilde was convicted). This act was passed by Henry Labouchere, who was a "strong opponent of homosexuality."

While on one hand, common society often viewed homosexuality as taboo, the opposite was quite true in instances of aristocracy and upper-class customs. The Victorian upper class (the wealthiest 0.5%) were commonly viewed as hedonistic, amoral, and personally disloyal. Among the aristocracy, extramarital affairs were tolerated — so long as they did not cause a public scandal. Aristocratic men were classically educated, and therefore familiar with the tolerant depiction of homosexual sex in ancient Greek and Roman texts. The ancient Greeks and Romans provided a decent model for upper-class Victorian homosexuality: a model that was not effeminizing or damaging to one's masculinity.

As the middle class grew and sought further influence, middle-class men looked for ways to distinguish themselves from upper class "hedonists." Whereas the upper class derived their reputation

from the opinions of others, middle-class men placed more importance on improving their own character through personal discipline and by adhering to religious and moral principles. And whereas the upper class believed that the pursuit of pleasure was an acceptable aim in life, the middle class feared that idleness and sin could ruin their precarious position in society. All this meant that middle-class men were more likely than the aristocracy to suppress or hide their homosexual desires. When the European colonizers started occupying lands, which they often considered subordinate and infidel, what they passed on was not the elite aristocratic behaviour, but rather the one which was adopted by the common Englishman. This led to sexual politics, being governed by class-divide. As a matter of fact, even in today's era, this class-divide is greatly reflected as the elite forces in a conservative country get to live lives to their own free will, while the burden of tradition is passed on to the comparatively lower classes of society. An adolescent, born in an affluent family might be flamboyant about their gender and sexual identity, but one born to a lower stratum, is subjected to a vast moral compass, shifting from which might cause mockery and ridicule, showing how gender and sexual violence has the subliminal trace of a Victorian Society's Class Divisions. In a way, the idea of Pink Capitalism can be decoded as the Class Divide in modern queer politics, where gender rights, more than being a symbol of revolution, is a mere appropriation of affluent aesthetics.

6. Pink Capitalism, Pinkwashing and its subliminal layers of colonial apartheid.

1. Superficial Support and Tokenism

Companies often adopt LGBTQIA+ branding during Pride Month or other events as a marketing strategy rather than a genuine commitment to LGBTQIA+ rights. This leads to tokenistic representation, where the community's struggles are reduced to marketing slogans rather than substantive support. When corporations position themselves as allies without taking meaningful action, it dilutes authentic activism and can mislead the public about the real challenges faced by queer individuals.

2. Commercialization of Identity

The commodification of queer culture can strip away its historical and political significance. Symbols like the rainbow flag become mere marketing tools rather than representations of struggle and resilience. Pink capitalism often prioritizes affluent queer individuals, leaving behind those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This can create a divide within the community and marginalize voices that need support the most.

3. Exploitation of Vulnerabilities

Many corporations exploit the struggles of LGBTQIA+ individuals for profit. This approach prioritizes financial gain over the welfare of the community, leading to a misalignment of values. The

involvement of corporations in LGBTQIA+ events can shift the focus from grassroots activism to corporate agendas, leading to a loss of control over the narrative and priorities of the movement.

4. Reinforcement of Heteronormativity

Pink capitalism often focuses on a narrow representation of queer identities, typically highlighting white, cisgender, and affluent individuals. This can reinforce existing hierarchies within the community and marginalize voices of people of colour, transgender individuals, and those from diverse backgrounds. By aligning queer identities with corporate interests, pink capitalism can reinforce heteronormative structures, making it harder for non-binary, gender-nonconforming, and other marginalized identities to gain visibility and acceptance.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper offers a critical examination of the precarious position of queer adolescents in India, framed within the historical and sociopolitical contexts that shape their identities. The intersection of colonial legacies, theocratic nationalism, and the rise of reactionary masculinities creates a landscape where visibility serves as a source of vulnerability.

The historical narratives of acceptance in ancient Indian and Islamic societies contrast starkly with the contemporary climate of repression, indicating a significant cultural regression influenced by Victorian moralism and colonial ideologies. The internalized homophobia and egodystonic experiences faced by queer youth are not merely personal struggles; they are reflections of broader societal opprobrium and systemic oppression, as well as a class bias criterion for queer acceptance. This paper underscores the urgent need to disentangle queer identities from the frameworks of pink capitalism and tokenism, which dilute genuine advocacy and reinforce hegemonic norms.

This research calls for a reimagining of indigenous queer politics that prioritizes the voices of marginalized identities and resists the co-optation of queer movements by imperialistic agendas. It advocates for a collective commitment to fostering spaces where queer youth can thrive, free from the shackles of societal expectations and prejudices. As we move forward, it is crucial to recognize that the struggle for queer rights is not just a fight against oppression but a quest for the recognition and celebration of diverse identities—a journey towards a more inclusive and equitable society, not only for gender or sexuality, but rather for the entire sphere of marginalization.

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