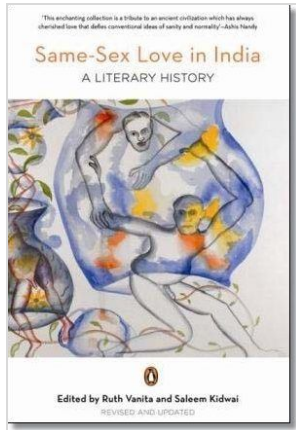


BOOK RECEIVED AND REVIEWED

Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai edited *Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History*

New Delhi, Penguin Books India, 2008. ISBN 9780143102069. xxxvi + 479 pp.



Review by
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Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History travels an uncharted territory as it remains in all its probability the only book to deal with the history of Indian written traditions about homoerotic love. Originally published as *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* by St Martin's Press (Palgrave-Macmillan) in 2000, the new edition assumes significance because of the changed scenario in the socio-cultural milieu. Read against the backdrop of the historic 2nd July 2009 judgement by the Delhi High Court, which legalised consensual homosexual activities between two adults, the book has the potential of being the manifesto of the gay and lesbian rights activists as it provides empirical evidence about the celebration of same-sex love across India over last two millennia.

However, the book deals more with love than with sex or eroticism. It tends to explore how the primarily romantic or passionate relationships between men and between women have been represented in history, literature or mythology across time and space and the societal reaction to such attachments.

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The book is divided into four broad parts. The first part deals with “Ancient Indian Materials” and has for its subject texts in Sanskrit and Pali, delving on Hindu and Buddhist traditions. The second and third sections are concerned with the medieval convention; while the second section treats the “Medieval Materials in the Sanskrit Tradition”, the third section has “Medieval Materials in the Perso-Urdu Tradition” for its subject matter. The last section, which is most diverse and interesting, discusses the “Modern Indian Materials”.

In the first section the extracts are from the epic, classical and early Puranic (ca. 2nd C BC–8th C AD) periods. The introduction however, goes beyond the four extracts in question, and analyses the ‘certain patterns and tropes that emerge in ancient Indian writings as sites for the representation of same-sex attachment’. Such tropes include life-defining friendships which often lead to a life of celibacy, sex change, cross dressing and undoing of gender, and miraculous birth to parents of same sex. The introductory chapter of this section also brings out the prescribed punishments for indulging in homosexuality and instances of homoerotic activities in ancient literature.

Islamic culture took its root in India in between the 8th–18th C. This period also witnessed the interaction between Muslim, Buddhist, Jain and Hindu religious traditions to produce a range of cultural practices that influenced the subsequent periods. As far as writing is concerned the period produced literature which can be classified into four broad linguistic groups–Sanskrit, Sanskrit based north Indian languages, southern Indian languages and Perso-Arabic and Urdu tradition. Of these four, the second section of *Same-Sex Love in India* is concerned about the first three. The texts belonging to these three linguistic groups can fit into the following major genres: the Puranas, vernacular retellings of the epic and Puranic stories, *Katha* literature, historical chronicles and devotional poetry.

The editors identify the *Bhakti* movement as the greatest religio-cultural development that engulfed India during the medieval period. Major fallout was that the medieval devotion was directed towards the Puranic pantheon of Gods and Goddesses instead of the Vedic deities. The single most remarkable feature of these deities is their multiplicity and variability; as such a chosen deity may appear in any form – male, female or neuter or even as animals and birds or nature. Consequent to such multidimensional divinities, the medieval devotion

also allowed for fluid intimacies between a devotee and the beloved deity as well as between devotees who formed a fraternal bonding. The medieval mystics often view God simultaneously as friend, spouse and child opening up possibilities of fluidity of the gendered structure. If such a relationship was mainly possible among the men, a different kind of same-sex intimacy is sometimes illustrated among women fond of each other (*sakhis*), when they decide to marry the same husband as it help them preserve their pre marital friendship.

The third section of *Same-Sex Love in India* is concerned with the Perso-Urdu literature depicting homoerotic love in the medieval ages. From 10th C onwards there were constant forays by various groups into India from beyond the Hindukush Mountain, which finally culminated in the establishment of Muslim empires in India, exposing it to Perso-Turko-Arabic cultural traditions. Originally such cultural practices remained confined within the centers of power but soon disseminated across the country due to the spread of Sufi traditions. Homoeroticism was quite visible during this period. The editors conclude that such visibility was possible due to 'cosmopolitanism of urban Islamic culture'.

Another important development during the medieval period was the fruition of Urdu, which came to replace Persian as the high literary language by the 17th C. The early Urdu writings contain a large body of homoerotic poetry. The editors trace the development of *ghazals* as a tradition in which the poet assumes a male voice to address a male beloved. The medieval Perso-Urdu literature seem to distinguish the role of the wife and the lover, whatever be the latter's sex and celebrates same-sex sexuality among men.

The last section of the book deals with the modern period, which the editors define as the 19th and 20th C for the purpose of the study. They point to two distinct features of this period – firstly, the rise of the homophobic voice, which was so long absent in the Indian cultural context and secondly, the growing representation of sexual love among women which gets subsumed in case of the men. The transition from the medieval to the modern period is marked by the emergence of Rekhti poetry in Urdu, in the late 18th and early 19th century Lucknow. However, the defining moment in the homoerotic tradition in India was its being outlawed in 1861 as Section 377 of Indian Penal Code. This law coupled with the denouncement of the Indian marital, familial and sexual practices by the British educators and missionaries went a long way to influence

the social reform movements of the period to have an anti-pleasure and anti-sex bias. As a consequence many of the modern, educated Indian minds internalized homophobia.

The editors have drawn attention to one peculiar phenomenon in India, where it is often probably easier to be a homosexual rather than be a heterosexual outside the marital premise, as it is hassle free for same-sex partners to stay together without raising any suspicion. However, such a relationship must remain clandestine as the homophobia that developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries does not allow any space for homoeroticism, particularly male homosexuality. The same kind of homophobia is also witnessed in the academic circles where the academy by and large avoids lesbian and gay studies contributing to the myth that homosexuality is absent in India. This experience is however, somewhat offset by the practices of the English print and electronic media and films, which in order to appear progressive, often derive their outlook from the western media. The editors tend to end on a positive note by pointing out the various religious practitioners of the day as well as the present human rights groups, who have openly come out in support of lesbian and gay practitioners thus developing a public debate on the subject.

The editors have done well to discuss the role of media, print and electronic, as well as films in delving with the treatment of homosexuality post nineteen nineties. This detraction from the written media might seem incongruous at the first sight but is unavoidable if one has to have an understanding about the contemporary situation. The only lacuna seems to be that they have not included any text from the media or film in the anthology.

Same-Sex Love in India goes to bust the myth that homoeroticism in India is a recent import from the West, by drawing from an eloquent range of writing spanning more than two thousand years of Indian writing. The book also serves to rupture the silence of the Indian academia over same-sex love and assure the homo-erotically inclined Indians about the long tradition where same-sex love has 'flourished, evolved and been embraced in various forms since ancient times'.

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