



## CRY FOR FREEDOM AND LOVE IN THE POETRY OF HOSHANG MERCHANT

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### ABSTRACT

*The advent of 'a new literature' by queer writers in India during 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century marks a 'new phase' in Indian Literature. Hoshang Merchant traces the emergence and development of gay literature in India that aims at creating a homosexual discourse in the modern academic and cultural realm in India. This paper reflects the selected writings of Indian Gay writer Hoshang Merchant who is considered as India's first openly gay poet. He has produced the plethora of creative writings that include numerous collections of poems, anthologies of gay writings and theorizations on homosexual love, Cry for Freedom and Love. The whole gamut of Indian Literature on same subjects like sex, love, the queer literary scene seems to be enriched with a host of prolific literary critics and creative writers such as Hoshang Merchant, Suniti Namjoshi, Ruth Vanita, Saleem Kidwai, R. Raj Rao, Ashwini Sukthankar, Eunice de Souza, Ashok Row Kavi, Firdaus Kanga, Kamaleswar and so on.*

**Key Words:** *Gay literature, homosexuality, love, queer community, Indian poetry, cry for freedom*

### INTRODUCTION

Poetry is the life-breath of heart—the heart that creates a feeling of love for beauty, evokes an excitement for life and awakens an urge to struggle against the odds of life. Indian culture is woven with the rich fabric of poetry. That Indian poetry proves the significance of poetry, rich in themes, thoughts, images and rhythms. Indian Poetry in English has now become an intrinsic part of Indian Poetry. In its initial stage, it was often tagged as derivative. Now it has come to its own by developing its own idiom, which is wholly Indian in form and content.

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Hoshang Merchant, Indian poet teacher and writer, was born in 1946 to a Parsi Zoroastrian business family in Bombay, India. He studied Surrealism at Occidental College, Buddhism in Dharamasala, and Islam in Iran and Palestine. He has lived and taught in Germany, Iran, America, and Jerusalem before becoming a Professor at the school of English Literary Studies at Hyderabad Central University. He helped to establish the Gay Liberation Movement at Perdue while corresponding with Anais Nin, the French Erotic writer, whose mass of essays novels and short stories were the subject of Merchant's Ph D studies.

*"When you make world tolerable for yourself, you make it tolerable for others"*

Anais Nin

From his published books of Poetry 'Stone to Fruit' to 'Sufiana' Poems he is the first Indian poet to have publicly acknowledged his Homosexuality. Hoshang currently lives a retired life in Hyderabad India after having taught for close to three decades. Despite from teaching Surrealism and Queer Theory to both Indian and Foreign Exchange students at the University of Hyderabad Merchant also played an important role in introducing Queer Indian Literature courses in the Universities of India.

Hoshang Merchant is a distinguished voice of gay liberation in India and modern India's first openly gay poet.

*"I am Indian, I am Gay, I want to articulate my pain and joy so that I may be to live not to commit suicide"*

*surely this cry or dry statement is understood.*

*"There is no need of privacy where there is love"*

- Osho

*"Literature has no sex and poems have no sex organs.*

*There is only good writing or bad writing."*

– Hoshang Merchant

He says, "Literature has no sex and poems have no organs" (Merchant 1999, xxvi). But the poet asserts that there are both good and bad writings in the realm of literature and he confidently proclaims that the homosexual literatures now in India form a great part of Indian Literature, and if they are to be valued, it should be done for they are great works of literatures that express human's mind and his life and position in the vast cosmos.

His first gay anthology, Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia has earned him critical acclaim. The publication occasions the emergence of gay literature in India.

In his “Introduction” to the book, Merchant remarks that his interest in India’s “homosexual literary history is more than personal.”

Gay sexual literatures are mostly personal, subjective and autobiographical in nature owing to the predicament of the writers.

Hoshang Merchant’s Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia, anthologises creative pieces of works from different literary genres that raise the most relevant issues governing the world of the ordinary homosexuals and the homosexual writers, both of whom are decentred identities. Sometimes Merchant translates Sufi poems and ghazals into English and reads into the homoerotic elements that conventional readings have always overlooked designating it to be an expression of spiritual love and union devoid of any physicality.

*Firaq Gorakhpuri’s poem “Public Meeting and Parting as Private Acts”*

*(Gorakhpuri 1999, 1), rendered into English by Merchant expresses, passionate love and longing of a lover for his male lover.*

The poet implies

*“This coloured cloth hides a secret joy  
There’s current playing under the shroud of the grass (5-6).*

The expressions like ‘secret joy’, ‘current’, ‘the shroud of grass’ are indeed highly provocative of the ‘unsanctioned’ joy and love.

Merchant is aware of the pitfalls of the tendency to value and appreciate homosexual writings only on the grounds of how radical and successful the writings are in disrupting and subverting fixed sexual binaries to achieve the political agenda of securing and fortifying a space in the mainstream society. The poet’s cry for freedom seems not to believe in too much of a sexist interpretation of works of literature since it kills the aesthetic literary value.

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A poet, critic, activist and academician, Hoshang may be popularly referred to as the first openly queer poet. But categorization of him in such a manner based simply on his sexual orientation is a complete oversimplification of who he is and the impact he has had.

This is not just in India's literary world, but Hoshang describes himself as,

*“a male homosexual Parsi by religion, Christian by education,  
Hindu by culture and Sufi by persuasion.”*

His studies took him from St. Xavier's College in Mumbai to Occidental College, Los Angeles, and followed by Purdue University, Indiana, where he also helped establish the Gay Liberation. Having lived and taught in Heidelberg, Iran and Jerusalem, his worldly travel and taking in the mixing of cultures, beliefs and thoughts are evident in his works.

Establishing him in the eyes of many as one of the last true Composers of Indian poetry. Through his work, Merchant takes us through his life – through hell and back, filled with magic, love, longing and blood lost; all through poetic prose, culture, society and undeniably the LGBTQ movement over the years. The Queer community, also better known as LGBT or Gay Community, is one of the most marginal and misunderstood communities in India. They were marginalized by law. Art.377 of the Indian Penal Code criminalized homosexuality. Since Independence, Indian society has changed a lot. The world has also changed. The British, who introduced Section 377 in India, decriminalized homosexuality in the sixties. But, in India, the lot of the Queers remained the same. Their sexual preferences stigmatized them. Homosexuality had to be kept hidden Attempts were made, without success, to introduce legislation to decriminalize homosexuality

Sex and Spirituality have no boundaries, so have been the articulations of the subjects in literature. The cry for love, the poetic of sexuality moves from being reflective of bodily sensuality to terrestrial pleasure and transcends itself in metaphysics. Hoshang Merchant's Sufiana: Poems (2013) takes such a perspective towards “sexual pleasure” and endangers the intersections of the sexual and the spiritual. The language of sexuality gets portrayed through the musical notes and the vivid colours in the canvas of the poems and ghazals in Sufiana: Poems.

Depiction of sexuality has remained a central theme in most of the literary writings in India. With the Victorian values crossing the geographical boundaries with the colonial modern, the influence of the dictates becomes strong enough to bring in the active role of the binary opposites—heterosexuality and homosexuality. The influential portrayal of sexuality in the native literature has made it to lose the openness of the Indian philosophical minds. Hoshang Merchant true to his publicly projected image of a Parsi homosexual leads the portrayal of a

sexual cult vis-à-vis experimenting with traditions and traditional symbols and images. The sexual mythology operating massively serves the literary canon in recovering what has been lost and what seems to have been endangered. Merchant who claims to be a “Parsi by religion, Christian by education, Hindu by culture and Sufi by persuasion” (Yaraana, 1999) alludes to the sacred way of living practiced in Indian societies which develops young ones into a homo-social group while taking them into an adult upbringing to adjust in a system of hetero-social cohabitation:

*“Today the boys are at their Sunday bath I watch them strip to the waist And plunge heedless, headfirst into the pond, newly born Their wet limbs ripple in the morning sun As their loincloths fall in coils to the floor Beads of water fall like rainbows on stone And the snake in paradise is aroused once more: Jai Shankar! Jai Jai Bhole Nath!”*

*(“Bathers at River Bhagsu Nag, Dharamsala,” pp. 80-81)*

Written in Sufi style, the poems—fifty-four in number—invoke religious yet sexual imagery such as Bhagsu Nag, Krishna and Radha and present voyage of life that begins with birth and ends in death. In his poem “Homage to Derek Walcott” he ropes in a vision of historical events that have made Indian society fertile. Beginning with Vasco Da Gama to the Arabs, the exodus of the European Christians to the Persians, all have enriched Indian tradition, culture, language and religion of the society.

Bearing an essence of pastoral elegy, the book witnesses Merchant’s search for memory—memory wet with pangs of separation from Iran (the land of Parsi origin) and from Bombay (land of his birth), both of which he has lost. Carrying the tradition of the poets, ruining for the lost homeland, the poems in Sufiana make Merchant, Buddha as well as Dalai Lama stand in the same queue and who live in memory. The goal of Merchant’s life is reflective in his poems when he writes:

*My lovers say I’m looking for a poem  
My students say I’m looking for god  
But I’m neither looking for lover nor poem nor god  
But for Death which is all of these (p. 49)*

His cry for freedom, journey towards death is his desire to set himself free from home but this memory remains with him and does not make him home-free. He projects his personal loss and longing for security of intimacy through the familial images of his mother, father, grandfather and at the end his beloved sister Whabiz—all of whom he eternalizes in his poems dedicated individually to them.

Through Sufi mysticism he transcends his feeling of separation and becomes one with his sister. *Sufiana: Poems* (2013) is yet another glorious contribution of Hoshang Merchant to the world of Indian English Poetry. The sense of individuality in Merchant arises out of his self-consciousness of highest order which *Sufiana* achieves. Images of Dalai Lama, Rumi, Ghalib, Derek Walcott and Makrand occur invariantly in the collection of poems who have all sung of the history of their own race. It would be of a great incitement to go through a voyage of change, of the racial or the familial that moves in a gyre and makes a return in its order of cyclical movement.

Despite our hypocritical tendency to generalize, philosophize and universalize the real predicament of small sections of people because we fear to talk about what society does not permit, we cannot turn a blind eye to the socio-political agenda that every gay writing attempts to present as Merchant warns us in the Introduction to *Yaraana* "Gay liberation and women liberation are political movements and have nothing to do with human liberation"

The uncomplicated frankness accompanied by a childish petulance with no diffidence or discomfort in his articulation, Merchants poetry hits the spot for its directness as well as the subtle dignity he employs. It is the tenderness that moves the readers *In White Point of Light*.

*It is night  
I cannot see my own hand  
But I feel the other body  
In Bed with me  
So, love they says is blind  
We roll into a composite  
Head and feet  
We roll into a composite  
Head and feet  
We create an embryo  
With a heart two heads and wings.*

An aspect evident in Merchants' poetry is his multilingual ability, especially in the poems where he had translated Urdu, Persian and French such as *Return from Dacca*, *Two Poems* and *To make a Picture of a Bird*. Hoshang Marchant is an academic and a widely travelled scholar whose breaks emphasize his verse.

*Hotel Golkonda* is Merchant's small volume of poetry which rummages bits of a story which began as it ended quite insignificantly in a prestigious hotel in Hyderabad. What Hoshang describes in his sixty-three poems is the wish to gather some scintillating aspects of his chance meetings and encounters with a waiter called Srinu. Their mutual concern that grows

into friendship and a friendship that grows into a form of love which binds the patron and waiter for a time.

*Each on has his own dream over coffee  
The chef dreams about America  
The waiter dreams custom  
I dream about the waiter*

It is not purely incidental that many of the Hoshang's encounters and partings in Golkonda takes place in unknown zones of transit such as railway and bus stations, lounges or roads. The poems share with the locales of the mentioned spaces, the transparency of dreams and the grip over memory. There is love but the love queen never expects anything out of his beloved. And as he lives his dream and as he perpetuates his love through poetry Merchant becomes a Sufi who is constantly offering and not expecting anything in return.

*When I see a serving boy  
There are stars in my eyes  
And he on seeing me  
There comes my gold mine.  
Do you ever get food and money here?  
Yes Sir!  
Do you ever get poems here?  
Never, Sir!  
Do you enjoy mine?  
We CERTAINLY DO, Sir!*

Merchant said in one of his interviews,

*"I lived out every fantasy. Sublimation is turned into works.  
I became an artist. We are not born with nothing we are born with a  
body.  
I created my own life with my own body.  
I lived in the inferno and came back to tell what I had seen."*

*People forgot their own names  
They remembered the Name  
Which too they soon forgot,  
Why do you ask the Name?  
They asked  
And remembered only love.*

According to Merchant, sexual politics is identity politics. And Merchant is not insistent on asserting his gay/ homosexual identity, but that of a poet. As a Parsi poet of surreal experiences, Merchant is constantly on the quest for love. Merchant becomes a hedonistic Sufi saint professing Sufi love not demanding for equal rights or acceptance and inclusion rights like majority of the Indian Homosexual activists. With him celebrating his love, lust and desire he paves the path for his children the future queer generations. He makes them realize that being Queer or being Gay is not a sin and love is universal. His poetry calms the disturbed and the confused sexuality to come in peace with oneself and accept oneself.

*When the Indus meets the sea  
It forgets it was the cold daughter of the snow.  
It becomes warm and shallow lost in the sand  
This land of sand  
And the Arabs came  
And Finding Hindus there  
They called this land of quick sands Hindustan.*

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*When the Indus meets the sea  
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*This Land of sand  
They call Sind  
And the Arabs came  
And finding Hindus there  
They called this land of quick sands, Hindustan*

Merchant perceives India as the land of quick sands in a way symbolizing how there are stands of hope for hate and dissent towards the queer communities to be drowned gradually, if the queer individuals of the society are ready to accept themselves and speak for themselves about their love, like what merchant had done ever so flamboyantly through his poetry.

*HOW THE REVOLUTION WAS WON  
So, hanging out a parti colored quilt  
As homage to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
I emerged into the 21<sup>st</sup>  
Where dead kings are reborn as poets*

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when coming out of the closet and making a statement of being Gay is still a ritual Merchant's poetry is a breath of fresh air for all seasons. His love is transient by choice, like how he remains unmarried by choice. He doesn't want to comply with the coercing social norms of marriage or relationship bonds but Merchant is celebrating his sexual freedom. His poetry doesn't just be that of a Gay poet or a Sufi poet, but his works are also extremely nonconformist, shunning away the norms and baggage of any kind of societal or institutional pressure.

*My children laugh  
They do not know everything I do is for them.  
They are the rain refreshing the world  
They are the needles piecing together  
My rent body*

#### CONCLUSION:

Sense of alienation is more or less a modern phenomenon. It is associated with a diaspora or the migrants from one country to another. These migrants, being aliens, suffer a sense of otherness, of rootlessness, a bicultural predicament. Such is alienation that the poet suffered in his boyhood, and this sense of alienation sank deep into his subconscious mind influencing his poetic creations. Merchant's poetry is often a celebration and any first-time reader will



naturally be drawn to the explicit openness with which he portrays homosexual encounters longing love and the transience of gay relationships. Being a poet preaching of hedonistic notions, Merchant doesn't cease to articulate his revolution through subtle. While most of the queer activists of protest for equal rights on the grounds of acceptance and inclusion as the patriarchal heteronormativity is the villain that they fight. Merchants poetry deliberately avoids any tone of vehemence but just accepts the queerness as the norm. He assumes his readers as well to be queer, making queer love a subtle celebration.

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