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(En)Queering 'Prakriti': Decolonial Ecofeminism and Lesbian Subjectivity in *Out! Stories from the New Queer India*

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ABSTRACT

The present article aims to explore the decolonial possibilities of queer ecofeminism entailing lesbian subjectivity and solidarity in Indian geography through the textual analysis of select post-colonial stories from *Out! Stories from the New Queer India* (2012) by Minal Hajratwala. Introducing lived experiences of queer people in the lap of nature, this book interpolates lesbian subjectivity and the politics of recognition broadly. Critiquing established narratives in queer feminist perspectives (Vanita, 2001; Roy, 2022) and ecofeminism (Shiva, 2010), this article critiques *Prakriti* (i.e., Nature) as a dissident source of *Shakti* (i.e., Power) for queer lives. In a country like India, the recent decline of the demand for legalising same-sex marriage by the Indian Supreme Court amidst significant political and religious controversy (Rajgopal, 2023) underscores the urgency of this discourse. In such a heated context, this article articulates the lived experiences of lesbian relationships in Indian ecology and examines queer ecofeminism as an instrumental approach to advancing lesbian subjectivity, and solidarity and addressing sexism.

Keywords: prakriti, queer ecology, ecofeminism, lesbian subjectivity, sexuality

INTRODUCTION

Under the hegemonic strand of heterosexuality, any sexual practice attempting its subversion is known as queering (Nayar, 2010). Broadly, queering is a process that can counter the mainstream society's compulsory heterosexuality. The concept leads onto a grimmer complex reality, particularly in the context of South Asia and specifically India. In fact, 'compulsory heterosexuality' has long been the only acceptable factor for the entire discourse of sexuality in Indian society, raising the question if 'compulsory heterosexuality is only about controlling desire, or is about dictating that the world can have only two kinds of people—women and men' (Geetha, 2007: 197). Therefore, the term queer is appearing here more as an umbrella term to include all contestations related to non-heterosexual inclinations (e.g., gay, bisexual, lesbian, transgender, etc.) of desires, identities, and practices without a suitable Indigenous name to be labeled. Within and beyond the prescribed sexual hierarchies and violence, such undefined sexual lives are often publicly targeted in Indian socio-cultural spheres (Bhan, 2006; Mahn and Watt, 2014). It was only in 2009 that homosexuality was decriminalised in the Delhi High Court, India, under many legal debates (Misra, 2009). Therefore, unlike in the West, it is only in recent decades that discussions on queer relations in India are witnessing a spurt (Vanita, 2001). These studies often critique queer identities as unstable in a continuing process within the binary of temporality and identity (Muñoz, 2009; Freeman, 2010). In turn, it opens fresh possibilities for queer standpoints in the Indian context, which has been in global circulation since the 1990s (Butler, 1993; Warner, 1993). Indian activists have also started questioning such queer existence as both a personal and defiantly political issue (Narrain and Bhan, 2005). In India political activism for queer rights are sometimes contested under the casteist, classist and sexiest power stuctures of the society (Tellis, 2012). Still without any doubt queer movements in India widen scope for the queer visibility, autonomy and representation (McGarry, 2024).

While queer ecology is gaining traction in Western contexts, a decolonial exploration through lesbian experiences is still needed in India. By critiquing lesbian experiences within the framework of queer feminism (Vanita, 2001; Roy, 2022) and ecofeminism (Shiva, 2010), this article will examine how the Sanskrit concept of *Prakriti* (Nature), traditionally associated with femininity, can empower lesbian lives as a source of *Shakti* (Power).

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Therefore, this article aims to explore the decolonial possibilities of queer ecofeminism[1] entailing lesbian subjectivity and solidarity in Indian geography. Even with the growing awareness, lesbian lives are hardly receiving significant attention pertaining to their relative invisibility in the Indian context (Bhadury, 2018). Surprisingly, mainstream Indian feminists also fail to address this gap while questioning gender rights for women in general. It is only very recently that heteronormativity and the sheer compulsion of heterosexuality are critiqued in feminist concerns through the lens of queer epistemology[2] (Menon, 2007). In the early 1970s, the queer feminists started critiquing the notion of 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Especially Adrienne Rich in her pioneering feminist work, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980), has mentioned that heterosexuality is more a social expectation. It has often been observed that lesbians are negatively stereotyped or misleadingly identified as 'frumpy shut-ins,' 'ugly,' and sometimes 'old-fashioned' (Keating, 2017). Even in public discourse, they become 'outmoded' (Thomas, 2016); and 'disinteresting' women (Lewis, 2016). As compared to gay sexuality, lesbians are also tagged sometimes as forceful or overly serious with no humour. Therefore, in some cases, lesbian resistance becomes a reaction to their internalised homophobia as uncultured bodies (Cautericci, 2016). This lesbophobia and its associated particularities are indeed across complex terrains starting from essentialist negative stereotypes to 'sometimes for extremely legitimate ones (a history of transmisogyny)' (Keating, 2017). Undoubtedly, the very idea of inclusivity of lesbians in the political coalition of LGBTQ is a critical as well as enduring efficacy, but to reconstruct the idea of lesbian episteme[3], an innate need is to work particularly for the term 'lesbian' itself (Strapagiel, 2019). Here, lesbian feminism has a huge role to play particularly by making feminism a lively and inclusive political strand (Ahmed, 2017). As compared to gay men lesbians are relatively less visible in Indian geography and one of the most probing reasons behind this is the lack of willingness of Indian lesbians to coming out publicly (Vanita in Ruchi and Jha, 2023).

Again, it is hard to perceive as well as decode the contested gendered experiences of Indian lesbians and their relationships without distinct contexts. One such collection of stories is *Out! Stories from the New Queer India* (2012) edited by Minal Hajratwala, portrays diverse queer experiences in Indian ecology, evoking 'an act of self-representation' (Hajratwala, 2012: 16) caught between imagination and reality. The article particularly focuses on stories like 'The Edge of Her World' by Anisha Sridhar, 'A Small-Town Girl' by Milind Wani, and 'Find Me' by Sitara Sachdev, since these stories captivate lesbian subjectivity and experiences in the lap of *Prakriti* (that is to say – Nature), they are concerned with forming an alternative consciousness based on ideas about a lesbian earth, broadly. Queer ecology and its future possibilities are emerging conspicuously in the Western context but mostly focusing on climate change and impending crises (LeBel, 2022; Seymour, 2013; Sandilands and Erickson, 2010). However, a decolonial exploration of queer ecology, particularly through lesbian experiences, is still unformed, within the Indian context. Mitigating this gap, our article critiques lesbian experiences in Indian ecology using qualitative research methodology, particularly through textual analysis. Focusing on the subject line of lesbian subjectivity and '*Prakriti*', this article will employ an interdisciplinary theoretical framework of queer feminism (Vanita, 2001; Roy, 2022) and ecofeminism (Shiva, 2010) for analysis. Since ages, Prakriti has been believed in Hindu mythology to be closely associated with femininity in India, and the present article will elaborate on how it energises lesbian experiences as an alternative source of *Shakti* (i.e., power) beyond the heteronormative *Prakriti* and *Purusha* (literal meaning man) dualism. By doing this, the article will further appropriate the broader possibilities of queer ecofeminism in terms of lesbian subjectivity, solidarity, and sustainability.

TOWARDS A DECOLONIAL QUEER ECOFEMINISM: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In contemporary debates and discussions around sexuality in Indian, queer ecology is an emerging theoretical idea. It often orients the sexual struggle as well as oppressions converging towards climate justice and its conservation (Patnaik, 2021). As an area of transdisciplinary threads, it includes aesthetics and politics subverting the heterosexual patriarchy within and beyond the natural and so-called 'normal' debate. Apparently, both these terms queer and ecology might appear distant from each other, but queer ecologists have argued their interconnectedness as 'nature is queer' (Farr, 2022). It actually subverts the conventional sexual binaries through nature which itself includes diversity, fluidity and non-conformity. It resonates closely with India's long recognised

[1] Queer ecofeminism is an intersectional strand that challenges 'compulsory heterosexuality'. It further recognises diverse sexual forms of human life within nature.

[2] Queer epistemology actually refers to the pathways of conceptualising sexuality and its related knowledge. It often questions the conventional assumptions of sexuality as being fixed and stable. For further details see Kim Q. Hall, 'Queer Epistemology and Epistemic Injustice', 2017.

[3] 'Lesbian episteme' specifically refers to the ways of understanding and knowledge about lesbian lived experiences beyond the heterosexual norms of the main stream society.

cultural and ecological non-binary sexual identities from Ardhanarishvara,[4] to various natural species. It is mostly under colonial heteronormative enforcement; the very inclusivity in Indian sexual perspective has been subdued. For lesbians, it is likely impossible to counter compulsory heterosexuality without going parallel to nature itself. In fact, for Morton, 'fully and properly, ecology is queer theory and queer theory is ecology' (Morton, 2010: 281). Destabilising the anthropocentric entanglement of scientific discourses, queer ecology recreates ecologically sensitive sexual possibilities that can transcend the pre-decided boundaries between species and environment broadly.

Similarly to climate activists, ecofeminists across national borders are also exploring the suppression of nature or ecology in connection with women's gender oppression in specific contexts. Val Plumwood (1993), more than thirty years ago, highlighted the related patterns between misogyny and ecological degradation. Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies (1993) have interrogated the politics of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy creating suppression of women's bodies and the environment. Earlier, it was only Cate Sandilands (1994) and Greta Gaard (1997) who initially enquired about the possible dimension of sexuality as another aspect of investigation for both ecologists and ecofeminists. This is primarily because queer ecologies can 'offer a political model that we might extend to the "real world": one in which imagination and empathy allow humans to build political coalitions across divides such as race and sexuality' (Seymour, 2013: 28). Therefore, beyond the singular praxis of popular 'homophobia' in queer theory, it opens the scope to deconstruct the apparent gap between 'human' vs 'nature' and also between the 'self' and 'other.'

It is primarily the shared emphasis on fluidity and interconnectivity among species beyond any binary mechanism, that the decolonial Indian concept *Prakriti* and queer ecofeminism are deeply related. Here *Prakriti* as per Hindu mythology is the feminine force of nature that often resonates divine energy. Such energy is fluid, transformative and creative that is natively known as '*Shakti*' (Khanduja, 2017). '*Shakti*' in the decolonial context of queer eco-feminism can not only offer resistance to fixed heterosexual categories, but also can shape potential pathways of queer subjectivity and sustainability. In this context, Vandana Shiva's provocation of Indian ecofeminism is quite instrumental in defining the advocacies of nature and women broadly for 'third world' ecofeminism (Shoba, 2013). Indeed, Shiva has propounded the emergence of women's environmentalism before the categorical foundation of ecofeminist events in the West organised by the UN. She asserted the irrevocable potential of Indian ecofeminism to 'lay the foundations for the recovery of the feminine principle in nature and society' (Shiva, 2010: 215). This is primarily because the feminine principle of nature is the epitome of *Shakti*, which is considered the 'living force that supports life' (Shiva, 2010: xvii). This *Prakriti* is undergoing several oppressions through developmental projects, as are the growing rates of gender relegations. This necessitates the re-invoking of the feminine principles of nature which can rejuvenate *Shakti* for gender subordinates. Shiva has extended her critique of colonialism and capitalism as agentic for exploiting marginalised women and environment. This propagation is effective for queer ecofeminism since both perspective challenges hierarchical power structures even in terms of gender and sexuality: '[t]he visibility of dramatic breaks and rupture is posited as progress. Marginalized women are either dispensed with or colonised' (Shiva, 2010: 44). It indicates the problematics of capitalism and colonialism on gender as well as environmental progess. Both conceptual articulations demand the need for sustainable living, for the needs of the environment and for marginalised sexual identities. The feminine principles of nature are seen as the basis of ecological conservation, as well as development. Shiva's ecofeminist stance considers feminism as an ecological revival to ensure the empowerment of all life sources through a gendered lens (2010). These standpoints primarily dismantle the colonial, capitalist and heteronormative oppressions that cause ill effects both on nature and marginalised sexualities. It advocates the inclusivity of the native knowledge systems grounded on the principles of interconnectivity and connection, where environmental justice is going in parallel with social justice for lesbian people in shaping their subjectivity.

The term lesbian subjectivity actually refers to the individuality of experience, desires and relationships of the lesbian people in both personal and distinct social contexts (Ryan-Flood and Murphy, 2024). It puts emphasis on the cognitive experience of a lesbian as 'woman' beyond heterosexual structure. This often explores the nuanced complexities that lesbians as individual subjects do experience at the crossroads of their gender, sexuality and social norms. Although same-sex inclinations are not at all new in Indian culture, with references found in ancient Indian

[4] Ardhanarishvara is basically an androgynous Hindu deity combining both god Shiva and goddess Parvati. The word literally refers to a 'Lord who is half-woman'. It embodies the fluid gender identities beyond binaries. The references of Ardhanarishvara can be found in various ancient Indian texts like the *Mahabharata*, *Shiva Purana*, and *Lingapurana*. Primarily it refers to the divine harmony beyond dualism.

literature like the *Purana*[5], *Mahabharata*[6], and *Panchatantra*[7] (Vanita, 2001), critical ecofeminist inquiry beyond the *Prakriti* and *Purusha* (masculine power) is represented as a completing duo of empowerment, which is still necessary. This hetero-patriarchal belief in India is part of a complex and contested socio-political and gendered power structure. It relegates the positionality of lesbian existence to 'unnatural' and, therefore, as the 'other.' Even this has been a serious problem for Indian feminists for a long time; when they speak for lesbians, it is often for the 'others' either consciously or unconsciously. It is about the oppression and marginalisation of women only, but still for those who are not 'you', lesbians remain objectified. In this sense, even the language rhetoric of the movements was not termed as 'us' (Roy, 2022). For Roy, in lesbian feminism, considering choice is the most crucial aspect of transcending disciplinary binaries, as it can offer diverse possibilities of lesbian existence 'especially as a way of moving beyond the tired debate around power and resistance that has long dominated feminist theorizing' (2022: 11). Other queer feminists in India are also moving beyond the common subjects of oppression narratives (Biswas, 2007; Chatterjee, 2018). In this context, reconstructing lesbian ecofeminism through the decolonial lens of *Prakriti* and its associated spiritual belief of *Shakti* can be effective, as it offer possibilities that can eulogise the existence of every woman and her impending relationships on the earth beyond the traditional method of 'othering.'

ANALYSING LESBIAN SUBJECTIVITY IN/AS PRAKRITI: RE-STOR(Y)ING STRUGGLE, SOLIDARITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Minal Hajratwala's book, entitled *Out! Stories from the New Queer India* (2012), touches on possible queer experiences in the context of everyday Indian life. Particularly, the three selected stories, namely 'The Edge of Her World' by Anisha Sridhar, 'A Small-Town Girl' by Milind Wani, and 'Find Me' by Sitara Sachdev, reflect upon the lesbian bonding between narrative characters Rosa and Kavya, Shampa and Suparna, Gitanjalee and Farah respectively. These women characters belong to different religious and cultural communities across diverse geographical locations. They are portrayed in either villages like Supurdih from Eastern India or small towns like Alleppey and Nainital from Southern and Northern parts of India respectively, away from the many metropolitan urban privileges that is the representative norm for queer people. One major concern of most of the villages or small-town societies of India is that it considers homosexuality to be a criminal offense against heteronormativity, and thereby often targets lesbians as distinct threats to society and broadly to nations: 'Lesbians may be constructed . . . as threats to, not embodiments of, heteronormative national culture; as dishonouring heterosexual male citizen-subjects because not appropriated by them; in xenophobic, lesbophobic terms, as originating outside the nation and as antinational' (Bacchetta, 2003: 951–952). Such perceptions of lesbian identity creates social fear, and also becomes evident when the principal of Gitanjalee's school, sister Rose, scolds her for making close friends with Farah, dictating that 'you should stop mixing with her. We don't want her to become a lesbian' (Sachdev, 2012: 397). The very usage of 'we' against 'lesbian' marks the perceptional otherness of this sexuality in mainstream social consideration. However, the lesbian question is inseparable in conceptualising any society and nation broadly as women's existence is fundamental there. Here comes a serious incommensurability between Indian society and being lesbian (Dave, 2012).

This problem of biased heteronormative acceptability also sometimes gets ingrained within the consciousness of Indian girls from their early teenage years. This even generates sheer fear for the term 'lesbian' itself. This is seen in the story and made exactly visible when Farah, in a playful mood, gives her cousin Malini a dare 'to be a lesbian!' (Sachdev, 2012: 398). The term 'lesbian' itself creates such an abandoning impact that it left Malini awestruck 'with a mixture of surprise and horror… [and] everyone around the now still bottle looked at me [Farah] with eyes full of blame' (Sachdev, 2012: 398). Even though there was no verbal fight or abuse of the term, the shocked expressions of the other girls were enough to reflect the heteronormative assumption of fear for the term lesbian. In fact, it is this fear of general public opinion that lesbians in India remain relatively invisible, and the same is the issue with Farah and Gitanjalee's growing closer and bonding during their adolescence: 'Every night we played the same secret game. Although it was innocent enough, we knew it was something we should hide' (Sachdev, 2012: 400). It is the compulsion of heterosexuality and also the gender subordination that lesbians face the challenge of visibility even for everyday interaction.

[5] *Purana* refers the collection of ancient Indian texts encompassing stories of the legends, myths, gods, kings and about the universe. Stories of this collection mainly explores the divine cosmic cycles highlighting gods and humans relationships.

[6] *Mahabharata* is an ancient Indian epic written in Sanskrit and it mostly focuses on the themes of justice, loyalty and especially nature of human relationships.

[7] *Panchatantra* is basically a collection of fables and stories of animals. Through the words of animals is highlights moral lessonsof human virtue and moral wisdom.

One reason for the relative invisibility of lesbian interactions in Indian rural villages and small towns is the maintenance of a conventional patriarchal mark of respectability that is often reliant upon the gridlines of heteronormativity. The issue remains the same when the lesbian relations between Shampa and Suparna come out of the closet door to the public. Their bonding is misleadingly compared with heterosexual relations by the villagers: 'It appears they were inseparable and loved each other like a man and woman do' and 'the villagers didn't want it to happen' (Wani, 2012: 118–119). The story deliberately unveils the heteronormative parameters persistent in society that often set the ideal benchmark by which to measure the idyllic image of womanhood. In such cases, it is often expected that the freedom of individual choice and pre-set social standards have to be forcefully reconciled. This will, in turn, ensure pseudo-familial respectability and the making of heterosexual Indianness under the rising codes of Hindutva (Bharucha, 1995; Juluri, 1999). These dialectical social assumptions categorically put Indian lesbians as 'the new woman within the new patriarchy' (Chatterjee, 1993: 130). This new patriarchy allows women to set their goals and relations only when those come under the purview of fixed cultural and spiritual qualities. In this patriarchal landscape, the visibility of lesbian relationships often emerges as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it challenges conventional norms; on the other, it faces a severe backlash. Thereby, the text reflects how in India lesbians, for their sexual choices are often targeted and face the 'oppressiveness of small towns' (Sridhar, 2012: 79) under patriarchal heteronormativity. For instance, 'a mob in Ludhiana had lynched two girls for being in love with one another' and another girl was 'gang-raped by her brother's friends after her love letters to a female classmate were discovered' (Sridhar, 2012: 79). These incidents also create a climate of fear and pressure for other lesbians restricting the scope for their open interaction and it is quite evident from Kaavya's words in the story: 'I just want to be with you, Rose. We can't do that here. Alleppey is just so … oppressive' (Sridhar, 2012: 79).

One major concern that plays a dominant role in such small town and rural societies is the general consideration of heteronormativity as the sole 'natural' sexual expression, and it often receives support from and is reinforced by popular culture. This support manifests in cultural narratives that reinforce the idea of heterosexuality as the only acceptable form of love and desire. Therefore, by default, the entire discourse of homosexuality becomes its 'unnatural' binary, a binary that goes all the way back to colonial India. These natural vs unnatural debates regarding homosexual desires then inform the debate between nature/culture. Here, sexuality becomes more 'about language as it is about the sexual organs,' and the 'paradox of sexual identities is that they are both artificial and essential, arbitrary but forceful, invented categories that nevertheless provide the basic directions' for personal goals, desires, and also social tie-ups (Weeks, 2011: 3–5). In fact, it is those self-employed custodians of sexual morality in a heteronormative society who often tag homosexual desires as 'unnatural'. One such instance is reflected when in the story Debjani Maity, the grandmother of Shampa and Suparna, expresses her disgust for her granddaughters' relationship: 'I have lost count of the number of times we warned them that their relationship was not natural. We summoned Shalishi Sabhas, the village court, thrice and tried to make them see sense' (Wani, 2012: 124). This pseudo-sense is actually the social construction of a sexual paradox for their lesbian identities, that also makes Rosa doubt her sexual inclination for Kaavya and draws upon colonial Christian religiosity: 'This… is wrong. It's…it's a sin' (Sridhar, 2012: 75). Such self-doubts among lesbians are the expression of the struggle that they are undergoing both inside the self and outside society. To be very specific, such perceived notions of sexuality are entangled within deforming codes of heteronormativity, which ostractise and stigmatise lesbians in India.

In this dialectical situation, the entire process of queering *Prakriti* or Nature, as evident from the textual references, is pivotal to implicitly counter the socially constructed association between lesbian desires and unnaturalness. This, in turn, also critiques heterosexuality as the only permissible 'normal'. Though it is quite pertinent that 'normal' and 'natural' cannot be used synonymously, their interplay is very often in the divide between nature and culture. Particularly, the select stories of this collection are reconfigured in the lap of *Prakriti*, where natural spaces can become the soft medium of lesbian romantic interaction. One such is the dark space under the starry sky of Nainital, where 'it was cold at night up in Nainital, and the sky was always clear, filled with a million stars' (Sachdev, 2012: 396), and beneath this Gitanjalee and Farah every night played their secret game of finding each other: 'In the pitch-blackness, I stretched out my arms to feel for where she was. I grabbed her school blouse from the back, but she got away. She moved again, and I found her by pulling on her loosened tie' (Sachdev, 2012: 400).

Suitable to the queer plotting, here, the darkness of nature in the hilly region of Nainital is used purposefully. The first one is to imagine a physical space away from the inquisitive eyes of unwanted interference and margins of conventional codes. In fact, spatiality has always remained influential for lesbian interaction in Indian geography (Singh, 2023). The bonding between Farah and Gitanjalee thrives in the lap of the night, natural darkness which also symbolically disrupts the notions of fertility and sterility along with nature and production. This invariably reconstructs the meanings associated with nature even with that of sexualities and conventions. Bonnie Zimmerman (1981) has meticulously countered this imposed 'unnaturalness' of lesbianism, debating that even the natural world can never be always blooming and productive like when it is in the dark. The darkness of nature at night might appear outwardly sterile here, but it never stops life from bursting, and, thereby, can easily disrupt the

imperative of sex in biology with that of reproduction. Hence, in the story of Farah and Gitanjalee, the dark space under the open sky becomes a relatable metaphor that implicates it both as a place of their choice and free will with distinct affirmation for their relation. Here, the textual references of natural spaces beyond being the mere sites of interaction also embody the feminine power that reject rigid societal norms and reclaims agency for lesbian choices. This makes *Prakriti* a metaphysical space of healing and resistance for Farah and Gitanjalee against social obligations and questions. Here Prakriti offers them autonomy from social surveillance by symbolically ensuring their privacy for love beyond the conservative approval. In the lap of *Prakriti* their relationships are not 'unnatural' but very much a part of interconnected love forces of the human world and beyond. Therefore, *Prakriti* both physically and symbolically becomes a liberating space for lesbian love, desire and identity synchronised with natural world that widens scope for lesbian emancipation both on the personal and collective level.

The queerness that prevailed in *Prakriti* is wide open for queer possibilities since *Prakriti* is the pivotal source of all life (Shiva, 2010). The textual references are suggestive of the self-determination of the lesbians and so is their liberation in/as nature. This also becomes evident when Rosa and Kaavya cherish their relationship in water by boating in a solitary river taking them:

> Somewhere far, far away where no one can find us, and we can be together forever and ever…the boat spun slowly. Ripples broke up the reflection of the coconut trees, and when Rosa looked in the water it was as if the world shimmered at her in a thousand new ways. (Sridhar, 2012: 73)

Outside the codes of conventional restrictions, lesbian relations are more prone to their choice (Roy, 2022), and thereby, shed off the imposed restrictions. It is a necessity to look beyond the polarised model of 'otherness' for lesbian relationships since it often figures them out as 'narcissistic doubles, self-reflections, bound to each other through mutual identification and self-recognition, or in terms of complementarity' (Grosz, 1995: 181). It is evident in the story of Farah and Gitanjalee also whose intimacy and closeness was questioned and restricted in their school but both of them prioritises their own choice by maintaining privacy of their love in natural darkness: 'During the day…Gitanjalee pretended I (Farah) didn't exist…but at night things were different…exploring the darkest corners of the school, exploring each other' (Sachdev, 2012: 400–401). Disrupting the established binaries here, the lesbian experiences are constantly in the process of becoming outside the strict blueprints of sexism or desire just as the productivity of the Prakriti.

The couples depicted in the stories, like Rosa-Kaavya, Shampa-Suparna or Farah-Gitanjalee do not merely conform any fixed category of sexuality but challenge very idea of heteronormative stability. They emphasise a continuous process of self-exploration and related transformation which closely invokes a kind of Deleuzian conceptualisation of 'becoming'. The Deleuzian framework of 'becoming' propounds identity as being fluid, dynamic, and continuous. Here in the context of lesbian relationships this notion of 'becoming' offers a wide scope since in this process Rosa, Kaavya, Farah, Gitanjalee and others can explore each other and redefine their identities. 'Becoming' as a process here reflects on their desires and experiences that open up a transformative resistance to self and desire. It is more for sexual exploration where pleasure is the only limit beyond any traditional intentions of sexual reproduction. For this purpose, Kaavya and Rosa 'sat, rocking gently in the water, pretended they were on an island far, far away… (as) movement rocked the boat gently, and Rosa felt Kaavya's arms around her. She felt soft kisses on her neck, her chin' (Sridhar, 2012: 75). This sensual experience between the two women in *Prakriti* has its own intensification as well as proliferation. The stories have made natural spaces an innate site for naturalising lesbian relations where couples like Rosa and Kaavya, Farah and Gitanjalee, or Shampa and Suparna engage in willing sexual encounters. All these fictional duos were initially doubtful or faced fear in terms of their relationships, but the openness of *Prakriti* enabled them to experience each other. This openness represents a broader metaphor for the acceptance of diverse identities within the cultural landscape. Here both the feminine principles of *Prakriti* and lesbianism are put at a textual juncture between imagination and reality. The provocation of these lesbians' identification in or as *Prakriti*, in turn, empowers them with *Shakti*. It is the *Shakti* of lesbian episteme that can break 'a taboo' resulting in 'rejection of a compulsory way of life' (Rich, 2003: 27). For this, rejecting the compulsory heterosexuality of the entire village, Suparna, and Shampa unite with each other in the paddy field: 'She (Suparna) sneaked out of the house and went with Shampa to a paddy field far away. Their bodies were found the next morning, tied to each other at waist with a towel' (Wani, 2012: 119). Their unification, though in death, in the lap of *Prakriti* marks the heightened *Shakti* of lesbianism to reject every compulsory pressure to conform, so that even death is preferable to convention. This construction does draw upon the tragic motif of the doomed lesbian story seen so commonly in western literature of the mid-twentieth century, however here we are also arguing that for these young women, death is liberation, not just annihilation.

The reconfiguration of a queer *Prakriti*, particularly in the natural spaces in the selected stories, is done very purposely. Beyond the physical paradigm, they also reflect on the psychological sustainability of the lesbian subjects which is rendered through all the female protagonists. Within the distinct contexts of village or small-town social life, these stories put forward the naturalistic depiction of how rural spaces are instrumental in constructing choices

for women and specifically for lesbians as they navigate their ways through such spaces. Undoubtedly their psychological interiority creates 'an opposition between "inside" and "outside"' (Campe and Weber, 2014: 2) since it is extensively constructed upon the 'larger patterns within the culture… forcing an internal space of subjectivity molded by external factors' (de Munck and Manoharan, 2019: 507). All the lesbian relationships portrayed in these stories face the challenges of imperative heteropatriarchal inputs of family and society. However, from being doubtful about the nature of their inclination towards each other, Rosa and Kaavya and also Gitanjalee and Farah confidently acknowledging their closeness, which signals a shift of their subjectivity towards conscious sustainability and identity. They have reconciled in their mind the distinctions of their internal mind with that of the external world: '[A]ll that we (lesbians) are is the result of what we have thought. The mind is everything. What we think, we become' (Sachdev, 2012: 401–402).

Sometimes identities are fashioned on diverse ways of self-realisation, of individual positioning across and against past narratives (Hall, 1996). Even the mode of narration becomes a key medium for reconstructing subjectivity (Smelik, 1999), and the same happens with lesbian subjectivity here. Ruth Vanita has long addressed that sometimes 'these young women did not term themselves "lesbian" but the media (both English and Hindi) did use this term to refer to them' (2013: 368). Quite in a similar fashion initially, Farah was not aware of the term 'lesbian,' as she uttered, 'I certainly didn't know what "lesbian" meant' (Sachdev, 2012: 397), but the school authority tagged them as lesbian. With anonymity and self-choice, the female lovers in this collection explore the natural spaces as evident from the stories, constructing an alternative queer *Prakriti* which is very Indian as well as decolonial. This decolonial perspective allows for the reclamation of narratives that have long been marginalised, reinforcing the significance of diverse sexualities within the broader discourse. Indian lesbians mobilise through different units of *Prakriti* and experience their very innate subjectivity through sexual interactions with their partners, they are women claiming their own sexual agency. Therefore, Farah and Gitanjalee can evocatively assert that 'we no longer played at finding. We became what they were afraid we would become: lesbians' (Sachdev, 2012: 401). The linguistic rhetoric of the above textual quote destabilises the prevalent 'us' and 'them' negative positioning of heteronormativity and lesbian episteme. Here, in an inversion, the hetero-patriarchal society becomes 'they' and therefore, the 'other' to the lesbians, marking a beginning of a 'New Queer India' of the title itself. It emancipates the notion of 'becoming' for sexual identity, opening the scope for lesbian intimacies that can felicitate the pragmatic relational sustainability of their subjectivity. Here relational sustainability not only denotes the maintenance of personal relations of lesbians but it also fosters broader gendered solidarity. While challenging the fixed gendered expectations, these relationships generate deeper human-nature communication and mutual care that are often vital in oppressive environments. The analysis makes visible how the lesbian interactions with nature emphasise on mutual care, autonomy and respect that invariably creates a framework for relational sustainability.

CONCLUSION

Following a comprehensive analysis, it is quite evident that the collection in *Out! Stories from the New Queer India*, curated by Minal Hajratwala, embark on a fresh perspective by delving into lesbian experiences deeply entrenched within the rich tapestry of Indian ecology. The literary spaces as elaborated in these three stories either implicitly or explicitly raise questions of the real-world queer life in India. It raises the concern if queer intimacies are openly possible at all within Indian family or among communities. Often urban backdrops are considered as sites for such queer explorations in literary texts but these short stories are queering the natural space instead. It enables people to look beyond the structured heterosexual categories as well as urban connotations of queer subjectivity. These stories erect their platform for self-expression, which not only transcends boundaries between reality and fiction but also challenges the profoundly ingrained socio-cultural practices and sexual norms in India. Presently, the same-sex marriage issue has become a much-heated topic for discussion since the Supreme Court of India had taken this petition for hearing under many contestations (Pandey, 2023). Though after several hearings the demand has been declined by the Supreme Court, it also contradicts the often tagging of gender queerness as 'Un-Indian' (Rajgopal, 2023). In such a demanding time, this article unveils the gendered and specific experiences of Indian lesbians. It further illuminates the possibilities of a lesbian episteme, seeing the narrative in/as *Prakriti* through a decolonial lens, rejuvenating their experiences as an alternative source of *Shakti* or power.

Within this context, this study has ventured into exploring Indian queer ecology, drawing upon critical insights of queer feminism and ecofeminism. In doing so, it challenges the prevailing dominance of heterosexual romances in Indian English literature. It puts instead a clear focus on the subjective closeness and autonomy of the lesbian relationships and the subsequent female gaze. These stories highlight the shadow of social discrimination endured by lesbians, representing a gendered performance that can transcend and deconstruct established identities. The stories boldly embrace the use of subversive repetition as a strategic act, challenging the strict confines of normative narrative expectations.

The article offers an alternative discourse on lesbian visibility. The natural spaces in these three stories become liminal, tentative, contingent, and intermediary sites where lesbian desire can be realised. Such stories can forge an extraordinary decolonial path that dares to defy Western norms of LGBTQ representation and thus disrupt deeply entrenched modern conventions of sexuality. They can bring forth the identity politics and unconventional representational strategies inherent to queer activism. Taking into account the contested gendered experiences of Indian lesbians within the unique context of Indian ecology, this article attempts to expand our understanding of *Prakriti* by drawing attention to the transformative and enduring power of storytelling. Queer ecology, as exemplified in this context, surpasses the confines of theory; it explicitly transforms and challenges our aesthetic as well as our ethical sensibilities.

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