
UNIT 2 LITERARY AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

The terms "queer", "queer theory" and "queer nation" have recently gained wide importance in academic discourses in the humanities and the social sciences. A few binary/oppositional terms include, but are not limited to, closet and open (i.e., coming out of the closet), homosexual and heterosexual, the normal and the queer, gay and straight, etc. You must have also come across phrases such as "gay pride march", "coming out", "closet", "heteronormative world", "Sapphist behaviour", LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer), and "sodomy" in local newspapers. These words gain significance in the context of the study of queer theory against the background of cultural/societal hegemony. In literature, queer writers have found expressions in societies that are systematically homophobic. While fighting legal battles and persecution, writers in different centuries and cultures have been able to create an alternative canon of queer writing.

In this unit, you will learn how law, religion and social discourses are crucial to the understanding of the construction of queer lives and literatures. We shall look at notions such as ‘closet’ and ‘queer’ and see how literary writing has moved from within a space of repression to begin to explore non-normative identities and desires, both in an international framework, as well as within India.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading through this unit you should be able to:

- Trace the origins of the term “queer” in relation to other terms;
- Examine some legal battles and their implications for writers within the queer literary canon;
- Describe some important English and Indian queer writers, their persecution, and their work;
- Examine the notion of the ‘closet’ in relation to the role of queer literature and culture; and
- Analyse critically the representation of homoerotic and homosocial desire in literary and cultural contexts in international and Indian frameworks.

2.3 ORIGINS OF THE TERM ‘QUEER’

It may be interesting for you to know that the term “queer” is recent in origin and the genesis of queer theory is heavily influenced by several theoretical and identical movements such as feminism, black movement, poststructuralism and postmodernism. Quoting from *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (1993, xv-xvi), Peter Barry writes in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*:

...‘lesbian/gay studies does for sex and sexuality approximately what women’s studies does for gender’.... In lesbian/gay criticism, the defining feature is making sexual orientation ‘a fundamental category of analysis and understanding’. Like feminist criticism...it has social and political aims, in particular ‘an oppositional design’ upon society, for it is ‘informed by resistance to homophobia [fear and prejudice against homosexuality] and heterosexism... (Barry, 1995, p.140).

Lesbian/gay studies thus attempts to foreground social and political issues concerning queer people, and the marginalization of queer persons who find themselves in an ‘oppositional’ stance vis-à-vis mainstream society,

due to existing prejudices and hostility towards them. While in recent years, the term 'queer' has been chiefly associated with lesbian and gay subjects, the scope of the term extends to issues such as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity, gender-corrective surgery, intersex persons, gender queer, and non-conforming and transgender persons as well. The term 'queer theory' was coined by Teresa de Lauretis; several writers such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich and Diana Fuss have positioned the queer and queer theory in the light of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications. Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, published in 1980, has been a significant text for the study of alternative sexualities. This does not mean that these writers and their work are not contested; they have, however, been responsible for laying out a theoretical and analytical framework of queer and gender theories. It was in the year 1869 that the term 'homosexuality' appeared in print for the first time in a German pamphlet written by Karl-Maria Kertbeny (1824-1882). In 1886 with the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885), sexual relations between men (not women) were given Royal Assent by Queen Victoria. And further, it was in 1892 that the word 'bisexual', in its current sense, was used in Charles Gilbert Chaddock's translation of Kraft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*. In the next section, we shall look at the extent to which laws and legacies regarding homosexuality have impacted our current understanding and acceptance of these terms.

2.4 BRITISH COLONIALISM: LAWS AND LEGACIES

In the history of western thought, it is a historical fact that homosexuality has been considered as a disease and is believed to be curable by medical treatment or by the availability of female prostitutes. During the British colonial period, for instance, it was intentionally termed as an 'Oriental vice' that corrupted young British soldiers in the colonial world although the law concerning sodomy came into existence as early as 1290s at the court of Edward I (Bailey, 1955, p. 145). Derrick Sherwin Bailey quotes from a treatise entitled *Fleta* which was concocted by a jurist at the court to authenticate it: "Those who have dealings with Jews or Jewesses, those who commit bestiality, and sodomists, are to be buried alive, after legal proof that they were taken in the act, and public (sic) conviction" (Bailey, 1955, p.145). Whether or not the English court strictly implemented such laws over the centuries unless it was a public issue, similar laws did govern the English society even centuries after Edward I (the last known execution for homosexuality in Britain was in 1836). The law was formally officialised during the rule of King Henry VIII in 1533 under the category of "buggery"

law. The court decreed a penalty of death for “the detestable and abominable vice of buggery committed with mankind or beast” (Bailey, 1955, p. 147). This included masturbation, anal and oral sex. With the rise of royal supremacy, sodomy was secluded from the authoritative jurisdiction of the Church and was shifted to the jurisdiction of the king making it a crime against the crown rather than against the Church, and gradually the position of the subject committing buggery was synonymous with that of murderers and other criminals against the state. Bailey writes: “...such offenders were now included, with murderers and robbers below the rank of subdeacon, in the category of those who might not claim Benefit of Clergy. Finally, the death penalty was imposed, though the manner of execution was not specified; in most cases it was presumably carried out by hanging” (Bailey, 1955, p.148).

The removal of the death penalty finally came into force in 1861 when the British court prescribed that persons “...convicted of the abominable crime of buggery, committed either with mankind or with any animal, shall be liable, at the discretion of the Court, to be kept in penal servitude for life, or for any term not less than ten years” (Bailey, 1955, p.151). In Britain, the trials of influential people against the crime of sodomy are some of the instances which have been considerably popularised in the modern-day gay liberation movement. The French philosopher Michel Foucault observes in *The History of Sexuality I* that in European history, there was a period of transition—“a centrifugal movement”—of people’s perception towards the subject of sexuality (Foucault, 1980, p. 38). The period from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century witnessed much transformation in specific social practices. Concentration on the “rules and recommendations” regarding the “sex of husband and wife” (Foucault, 1980, p. 37) shifted to surveillance of the sexual life/fantasy of a different group of people:

...what came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, mad men and women and criminals; the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex; reveries, obsessions, petty manias, or great transports of rage. It was time for all these figures, scarcely noticed in the past, to step forward and speak, to make the difficult confession of what they were (Foucault, 1980, pp. 38-39).

During the period following the seventeenth century ‘types of individuals’ and ‘individual behaviour’, which were either ‘silenced’ or ‘neglected’, came to the forefront to be codified; and authorities—political, religious or otherwise—started preaching about their dangerousness. The scope of such a codification extended to multiple colonies as well. Thomas Babington

Macaulay inherited penal ideas from the law of England in order to draft the Indian Penal Code (suggestions were also drawn from the French Penal Code and from Livingstone's Code of Louisiana); Section 377 of the Code criminalized sodomy in India with the spirit of Macaulay's time. As you have already read in several units of Block 3, this has recently been challenged by the Delhi High Court in 2009. Significantly, the Code reduced death penalty to 'life imprisonment' or a term that a court would prescribe along with a fine. Jurisdictions concerning such sexualities, as explained by Foucault, became the order of the day for decades in the Indian subcontinent as well.

This colonial legacy came not just to India but to several other countries under British rule and continues till date in the laws of several countries. In India, the Delhi High Court delivered a historic judgement on 2 July 2009 and read down the century-old colonial anti-sodomy law. You have already read in detail about Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in Block 3 (Unit 3) of this course. The judgement is widely available online. The case is now in the Supreme Court and interestingly it is not the Indian State that is interested in retaining the law as it was, but a bunch of fundamentalists of different shades and religious interests whose prominent claim is that queerness/homosexuality is against the 'great' Indian culture. Let us now look at how the law has been used in persecuting and constraining queer writers, or writers who wished to explore the area of queer sexuality.

Check Your Progress: What is the legacy of British Law against sodomy? What trials have been important and why?

2.5 PERSECUTION, LITERATURE AND QUEER THEORY

It is important to note that a text on homosexual sexuality and homosocial or homoerotic desire does not necessarily presuppose that the author is homosexual. Neither does queer theory claim that a homosexual artist produces texts depicting *only* homosexual or homosocial desire. Further, a text or writer might not have explicit descriptions about homoerotic desire, yet the context could be under the purview of queer theory. In this section, you will understand how writers have used gay and lesbian themes in literary works and how the literary texts produced in different centuries have depicted the socio-cultural realities of queer lives.

Religious scriptures such as in Christianity, Islam as well as Hinduism have only a few passages which condemn homosexuality directly or indirectly. These have become the genesis of homophobia in many countries. In most cases, interpretations of these passages have given rise to, and influenced, homosexual persecution and homosexual hatred along with ridicule, exclusion, and attempts to change behaviour to imprisonment and even execution. Earlier we have seen that with the rise of royal supremacy in England with King Henry VIII's break with the Catholic Church, sodomy, along with several other crimes, gradually became a crime against the crown rather than against the religious institution. Tolerating the queer identity or behaviour, thus, is subject to change and the condemnation or trial of several influential people provides a backdrop to literature as well. In this section we shall see how homoerotic and homosexual themes have been of use in investigating past and present sexualities. Before we start looking at a few instances from literary and cultural texts, it is important to note that the marginalization of queer literature by the mainstream canon has led to the formation of an alternative canon. Further, gay and lesbian writers have been unable to express their feelings/sexualities owing to the nature of societal pressure and cultural norms of the 'perceived' heterosexual society and audience. Both politically and culturally, the gay and lesbian population has been non-mainstream and has been marginalized throughout the ages. Socially, the everyday harassment remains central to queer life and literature. Hence, declaring one's sexual preferences—in other words “coming out of the closet”—has accelerated the freedom struggle of the queer population and has helped the gay and lesbian population to find its voice in a society that has perceived any form of non-heterosexual sex as a threat.

In the sub-sections which follow, let us look at the specific circumstances surrounding the lives and works of three authors from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries, in order to grasp the impact of social pressures and hostility on literary writers who struggled to express homosexual themes or ideas in their writings.

2.5.1 “The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name”: The Case of Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)—the famous writer of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—had to undergo a trial for “posing as a homosexual” almost a century before queer theory found its way to the academia. During his trial the Marquis of Queensberry—who accused Wilde of sodomy and of corrupting young people—made use of his literary texts to prove him homosexual. The issue is important for various reasons:

- Wilde, a very successful writer, had been dragged into the court;
- He was condemned for posing as a homosexual; and
- Literary texts were used for public conviction at the court.

Wilde was asked by Queensberry's lawyer to define what he means by "the love that dare not speak its name", which had appeared in a poem entitled "Two Loves" by Alfred Douglas—Queensberry's youngest son whom Wilde had befriended—and was published by Wilde in the magazine *The Chameleon* (1894). Although he was sentenced to two years in prison, Wilde's explanation serves an aesthetic purpose and is self-explanatory even today. It also alludes to gay aesthetics in the larger context of queer studies. Wilde replies:

The love that dare not speak its name in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you will find in the sonnets of Michael Angelo and Shakespeare—that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect, and dictates great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michael Angelo and these two letters of mine, such as they are, and which is in this century misunderstood—so misunderstood that on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, and it is the noblest form of affection... (Goodman, 1989, p.114).

It may be evident to you, from the above, that owing to the nature of societal pressure and strict Victorian law, neither did Wilde defend homosexuality *directly* nor did he mention that he was homosexual. Nor did he state that the poem or his letters mirrored homosexual love. Wilde's trial serves as a significant event of homosexual torture, and projects the attitude of the Victorian period towards any discourse about alternative forms of sexuality.

Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* terms this notion or attitude of repressing and condemning any form of alternative sexual practices other than monogamous heterosexual sex as a 'Victorian attitude'. (You have already been introduced to some of Foucault's views in the previous unit. It may be helpful for you to review these again.) It is because of Victorian bourgeois society that—Foucault argues—sexuality has been repressed, codified and has entered the domain of the home for the purpose of 'reproduction'. He also states that in regard to the subject of sex and sexuality, "silence became the rule" (Foucault, 1980, p. 3). Moreover, though Wilde succumbed to a term in prison, the trial of 1895 generated a lot of discussion in the field of letters and politics. With an aim to reform the

court's attitude towards homosexuals and homosexuality, Edward Carpenter—the writer of *Love's Coming of Age* (1896) and *Ioläus: An Anthology of Friendship* (1917)—suggested to Havelock Ellis—British physician, psychologist, social reformer and writer who studied human sexuality—that “the prosecuting counsel, Sir Edward Clarke, be sent some scientific literature on the subject” (Copley 2006, 75) as it was being done in Germany. It was because of the literary representation of same-sex desire that Wilde's writing caused such havoc in the political circle, to the extent that there were proposals to withdraw all his plays from the stage of London. Hence, the trial has been influential in many countries, in many ways, and in the modern period it has served as an example for homosexual emancipation. Moreover, the issue suggests that with Victorian rule and law, in several colonial countries the issue of condemning homosexuality has become a trend for generations. You should remember that Wilde's trial has been influential both in literary and political circles. The phrase “the love that dare not speak its name” has been evoked constantly to cite the role of Church, law and society in subjugating the homosexual subject and the desire to find same-sex love in many countries.

2.5.2 Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*

Let us take another example. In 1928 Radclyffe Hall published *The Well of Loneliness*, a novel which openly portrayed a lesbian relationship. The novel projected the story of Stephen Gordon and Mary Llewellyn who fall in love and face the consequences of lesbian love in the form of social isolation and utter rejection from family and friends. It was argued that with the publication of the book, lesbianism moved to the home front. It is noteworthy to mention that lesbianism has been opposed more strongly in history than male homosexuality. The book became an easy target for portraying lesbian issue openly. James Douglas, editor of the *Sunday Express*, openly started targeting Radclyffe Hall and the book, and portrayed Hall's photograph in a negative way in the newspaper. Though the book was banned by the British court with a vituperative campaign, the negative portrayal of her photograph and her way of dressing became an inspiration for many lesbians who were conscious of their identity.

2.5.3 The Indian Context: The Trial of Ismat Chughtai

With the issue of ‘moral purity’ growing strong, because of ‘Victorian’ morality and because of the Indian nationalist discourse, there is a relative lack of homoerotic literature in the colonial period. What we have instead is a faint homophobic voice. The case of Ismat Chughtai is an apt example. Her short story “Lihaaf” (“The Quilt”), for instance, generated a lot of

controversy when it was first published in the year 1941. The story presented a lesbian relationship between the characters of Begum Jan and Rabbo, which scandalized most of the readers. With the controversy surrounding the story gaining strength, she was charged with obscenity by the British government. She challenged the ban on the story and won the lawsuit. The trial lasted four years and is documented by her in *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan* (1994). Chughtai's story is important in queer literary discourse because of several reasons which we shall discuss in Section 2.6.4. It would be noteworthy to mention, here, that it was not just male (homosexual) writers who were tried; women writers too have challenged the heteronormative world and have seen persecutions in the history of the gay liberation movement.

In the next section, let us examine the relationship between writing and same-sex desire, particularly in the light of the metaphor of the 'closet'. Before we do that, however, it would be useful for you to keep in mind a certain degree of caution in using terminology such as 'gay', 'lesbian', and 'homosexual' so that the historical contexts within which these terms appear, and the connotations that they may carry, are not lost sight of (see Box 2.1 below):

Box 2.1: A Note on Terminology and Queer Writing

It is important to point out here that even though we have been using the terms "gay," "lesbian" or "homosexual" in the context of literary writings produced in the last century, these are actually recent categories, so we need to use caution when using them for texts and events before their usage became common. At the same time, there are threads of "same-sex" desire, or what has here been called homosocial and or homosexual desire present throughout literary history. Even more complicated are the histories of gender non-conforming and gender transgressive persons and the reading of their lives or texts. These writings have been read at the sometimes troubled and often complex interstices of gender and sexuality, of queer and transgender theories.

Another equally important aspect in the history of "queer writing" has been the project of reclaiming literary work that has been of importance for both the women's movement and the LGBTQ movement. This project has entailed the foregrounding of women writers and artists as well as "queer" (as we might see them or read from their work) writers or writings. It has been done in the western countries and has been done in India as well.

2.6 WRITING AND SAME-SEX DESIRE

In the above sections, you have seen how laws against homosexuality have forced writers to write from within a closeted space, whether it was in Europe, USA or India. The shift in discourse after the 1940's and 1950's, in western countries, has had a wide reaching impact on LGBTQ organising the world over. In Block 3 of this course, you have already read in some detail about 20th century LGBT/Queer movements. In this section, we shall look more closely at the origins of the 'closet' and its use in queer literary theory.

In modern times, whatever the religious and cultural implications of the texts may be, they evoke a sense of liberation concerning freedom of speech and writing. One aspect of such an exercise is highly political if not aesthetic or cultural. All forms of sexual preferences, except that of heterosexual monogamous marriage, have been condemned in different periods in different ways. There is, as Foucault points out, less tolerance towards the subject of sex and sexuality in the period following the seventeenth century. The Victorian mentality has set upon people on the subject of sexuality and it has become a subject of reproduction in most cases. Hence, the cultural and societal aspect of defining the queer space is highly crucial in understanding the nature of the closet. It is important to note that it is because of societal pressures that many writers cannot declare their sexual orientation, and produce literature from the closet. It indicates, in principle, that queer writers in different centuries have performed their shame and guilt of being homosexual owing to legal and social stigma.

In the sub-sections that follow, we shall begin by examining the notion of the 'closet' and its role in literary discourse. We shall then look at specific instances of representation of same-sex desire in the writings of three women writers, located in diverse time periods and cultures, in order to get a broad overview of some of the ways in which the closeted space of homosexuality has been evoked in literary writing.

2.6.1 The 'Closet'

John Clum in *Acting Gay* (1992) defines the closet as “less a place than a performance—or series of performances, maintained by the heterosexist wish for, and sometimes enforcement of, homosexual silence and invisibility” (Clum, 1992, p. 88). The closet, as a space, is quite invisible; as a metaphor, it chiefly stands for silence, pretension, enforced performance and exile. Clum adds: “Like any good performer, the closeted individual seeks approval

by giving his audience what they want, but in the process he performs his shame at being homosexual” (Clum, 1992, p. 88). For queer people, the closet is “a shaping presence,” states Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 68). The closet acts as a fence—as protection—from law, religion and society. It is a way to safeguard the self from persecution and public discrimination. Thus, any understanding of the position and performance of the queer in different centuries has to be accompanied by a re-reading of cultural texts and re-defining the public and private space. An enquiry into the field of alternative sexualities must be juxtaposed with re-reading of texts throughout the centuries and this portrays—if not historically proves—how the queer has found a space in different centuries. Queering a culture has to come with a sense of understanding that freedom of speech and freedom of writing are crucially linked with the sense of an identity and self-portrayal. The enquiry of the closet is linked with the culture, ethos and thought-process of the century, its law, religion and social discourses. While the self-portrayal of the homosexual, in the form of a sexual identity category, is recent in origin, it is also vital to observe that many queer writers are victims of social stigma and must often adapt to, and perform according to the nature of mainstream societal norms.

Hence, one aspect of queer literary theory investigates the structure of power, knowledge and language in literary discourses because the location of the queer is structured around exposing hidden meanings and distinctions within the larger stream of literary texts. While linguistic enquiry and cultural identity remain important aspects of Sedgwick’s enquiry into the subject of the closet, the construction of an identity remains crucial in a world that has constantly universalized sexual positioning of men and women. With the mark of post-Stonewall era (period following the series of violent demonstrations against anti-homosexual police raid, 1969), gay and lesbian perspectives have gained wider importance in the field of politics, sociology, literature, philosophy and archaeology. Finding its genesis in feminist analyses of patriarchal discourses, the earlier approaches to queer theory focused on showing that sexuality and sexual identity are socially constructed: they change accordingly to the positioning of culture and society. The essentialist aspect of sexual orientation, however, is that one may be born gay or lesbian and may therefore exert less choice in deciding one’s sexual preference. These two opposing opinions have dominated the debate concerning sexual identity (just as one aspect of feminist theory claims that one is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman because of one’s sex). Different aspects of queer theory and queer reading are thus derived from and depend upon these two approaches on the discourse of alternative

forms of sexualities. The notion of essentialism sets sexuality apart from culture and society and foregrounds the life and attitude of the queer subject. On the other hand, the social constructionist approach emphasizes the role of historical periods, their law against sexuality, religions and other forms of social discourses that shape one's sexuality within the purview of mainstream society.

We need to recognize that though not explicitly mentioned as “homosexual” or “gay” in the ancient times—because the terms did not exist then, and many cultures hardly ever had proper synonyms for the category or the act—there have been references to alternative forms of sexual practices in various cultures and in literatures of several countries. Owing to the nature of positioning a queer past, locating an historical or genealogical enquiry into the field of sexuality in literary works greatly depends upon exploring a genealogy of queer writing throughout the centuries. Further, from ancient Greek to Indian culture, homoerotic sentiments and homosexuality have been depicted in temple carvings, artworks of Greek and Roman cultures and vases of multiple countries in different periods. Representations of, and discussions about homosexuality range from Plato's *Symposium* to Shakespeare's Sonnets and have been portrayed in multiple ways.

Ancient Greece remains an example of a golden period of tolerance of homosexuals and same-sex love. There are references to pederasty—physical bondage among adult men and adolescent boys—in the work of many historians/philosophers. In fact, the adolescent's education in ancient Greece was informed by accepted sexual practices, and flourished for centuries before censorship on homosexuality became a trend. True love, Plato remarked, is between two men, and homoerotic love is chiefly about gaining knowledge and education and for attaining wisdom; and hence Plato remarked that it is superior to all other forms of earthly love. Let us now turn to the work of the well-known writer, Sappho, from ancient Greece, whose name and island became associated with a culture which later came to be known as lesbianism.

Check Your Progress: What does the term 'closet' imply? Can you think of any examples (stories/ narratives/ novels/ films) from India which would help to throw light on this concept? Describe in your own words.

2.6.2 Sappho's Lesbos

Sappho, a poet from the island of Lesbos, composed love lyrics—approximately 12,000 lines out of which about 600 lines survive—in praise of women and girls. She is also believed to be the head of *thiasoi*, a community of women who lived together and were bonded by same-sex love. It is also believed that the women in Sappho's community were priestesses of the goddess Aphrodite. Although there might have been accusations of prostitution, Sappho's popularity as a poet in the island remained unquestionable. Often sensual and melodic, the love songs of Sappho primarily show her affection and adoration for female figures. Hence, with a celebratory note to Sappho's lyrics, the term "lesbian" is derived from the name of the island, Lesbos, where Sappho—it is assumed—lived and educated young girls and females in the sixth century BC. In the cultural context, historians are never sure whether same-sex love among women was ever a problem in Sappho's period and whether the reception of same-sex love was negative. Though uncertainty is the norm when we discuss Sappho's poetry from our point of view, such love may have had positive implications in terms of gaining education and knowledge. Placing Sappho's work within the queer literary canon comes with an understanding that Sappho wrote love lyrics in the praise of women. It is an act of rediscovering cultural texts and placing them in the light of theoretical development of the modern-day queer movement. Sappho's position as a central poet of the queer literary tradition has given rise to re-reading of other writers of different ages. Re-reading of cultural texts comes with a sense of understanding of different cultural and sociological contexts.

While Sappho's lyrics belong to ancient times and are set widely apart from those of contemporary women writers, it is interesting to see the links between the ancient and modern worlds in the context of a long tradition of homoerotic writing, and contemporary theorizing about same-sex desire.

2.6.3 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

In the literary context, establishing a tradition of homoerotic writing is to build an alternative canon for writers whose texts have been considerably neutralized due to a 'Victorian attitude' and homophobia. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick shows that there is a tradition of 'homosocial desire' ('desire' in all senses of the term) which has been present through several centuries in English literature. She also shows how a tradition of male-bonding has gained some importance in English writing. Taking a perspective from social constructionism, Sedgwick—like Foucault—treats concepts like 'desire,'

‘masculinity,’ ‘femininity,’ ‘lesbian’ and ‘homosexual’ as historically unstable notions and as loaded terms having historical and cultural meanings according to the cultural milieu of the age. Taking instances from several celebrated authors such as William Shakespeare, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Charles Dickens and others, she discovers that there is plenty of material available on same-sex sexual relationships. The following is one of Shakespeare’s sonnets that Sedgwick analyses in the light of queer theory:

Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still;
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.
To win me soon to hell, my female evil
Tempteth my better angel from my side,
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
And whether that my angel be turn’d fiend
Suspect I may, yet not directly tell,
But being both from me both to each friend,
I guess one angel in another’s hell
Yet this shall I ne’er know, but live in doubt,
Till my angel fire my good one out. (Shakespeare, Sonnet 144)

The depiction of good versus evil here marks the narrator’s desire to succeed in love. The triangular love depicted shows the desire for the male-counterpart and represents both the “male lover” and the “dark lady”—the two characters who find space in Shakespeare’s sonnets. Exploring the speaker’s intention to find the male-counterpart’s love, Sedgwick suggests that “while genital sexuality is a good place to look for a concentration of language about power relationships, the relation of that language...to other power relationships is one of meaning, and hence intensively structured, highly contingent and variable, and often cryptic” (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 48). There remain, in fact, numerous instances of homoerotic love in other texts of different centuries that Sedgwick explores.

Just as we can trace the history of queer writing from Sappho to Sedgwick in the west, scholars have also attempted to locate moments in Indian history which manifest the representation of homosexual and/or homosocial desire in literary texts. In the following sub-section, we shall return to our earlier example, that of Ismat Chughtai, as well as other examples of queer writing in the Indian context.

2.6.4 Queer Writing in the Indian Context

In the Indian context, there have been numerous references to same-sex love, homoeroticism and same-sex sexuality. Researchers of Indian sexualities (especially queer Indian sexualities), while tracing the genesis of the cultural production of a queer culture in ancient Indian archaeological sites, architectural constructs and in categorising the act as an 'Oriental vice' in the colonial period, point out that notions such as 'queer culture', 'queer nation' and 'queer people' hardly ever technically existed in India. With the publication of Ugra's *Chocolate* (1927), a collection of short stories in Hindi, the first ever notable debate on homosexuality takes place in the 1920s. Earlier we observed how Ismat Chughtai's short story "*Lihaaf*" ("The Quilt") generated a lot of controversy because it portrayed a lesbian relationship between the characters of Begum Jan and Rabbo; the theme in fact scandalized most of the readers. Let us look more closely at this story in the light of our earlier observations.

The story "*Lihaaf*" has a narrator, who is generally identified as a little girl; however, a careful reading of the story reveals that the girl is of certain age when she narrates her experience to a gathering. She goes back in time and remembers the incident that took place when she was left with Begum Jan. The story employs two techniques: first, it projects a child as the narrator to show the child-like innocence of telling a story; and second, it presents an ordinary object such as the quilt to narrate a lesbian experience. These are two techniques used by Chughtai to show a complex relationship in an easier way to draw the attention of her readers. Further, the audience of the story remains skeptical because it is observed that the story breaks in between and presents other issues (in fact the narrator's interpretation) rather than describing the real story of the 'quilt'. The story of Begum Jan is re-created and told when the young girl who witnesses the lesbian love grows up. The narrative takes the reader to a description of the miserable life of Begum Jan who is in despair and is having a period of loneliness. She narrates the story when Begum Jan meets the new maid, Rabbo, and there is a sudden transformation in her personality. In the political scenario, the story created a sense of havoc because it explored the theme of lesbian love. Chughtai's trial is an example of how law and social discourses have positioned alternative forms of sexualities in different societies.

In the last two decades, the focus of queer Indian research has been on linguistic or literary-critical analysis to show the representation of gender transpositions in Indian socio-cultural discourses. The last decade of the twentieth century has witnessed the publication of two queer anthologies:

Yaraana: Gay Writing from India (1999), edited by Hoshang Merchant, and *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* (1999), edited by Ashwini Sukthankar; both the anthologies were published by Penguin. These two anthologies, arrestingly the pioneering pieces in the field of queer writing in India, were highly influential in the formation of a canon and in providing a structure for a queer movement in Indian literature. The development of a body of queer texts occurred at a time when feminist and *dalit* literatures in India were already making the rounds in academic circles. In the early 1990s when Susie Tharu and K. Lalita were anthologising *Women Writing in India* and critics in the humanities and the social sciences were discussing alternative voices, heterosexist perspectives were being challenged by writers and activists in the queer circle. Taking inspiration from the two pioneering anthologies, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai edited *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* in 2000 and included passages that depict same-sex love from ancient, medieval and modern India. The anthologies indicate, in principle, that a body of queer literary works has been present through the ages, though it was not technically categorised as “queer literature”.

Although this unit has focused almost entirely on issues related to same-sex desire and their representation in literary works, we should draw our attention to an equally important dimension that has not been covered here, which is a discussion of transgender issues and the area of “gender studies”. However, this has been adequately dealt with in Block 3 in several of the units of that block. It would be a useful exercise for you to look at those issues in the light of the discussions of literary texts discussed above, or in the light of literary works that you have read elsewhere, and analyse these from gendered perspectives.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

Based on what you have read so far, you may be able to summarize that there is a qualitative difference in defining the queer as a sexual category. Though “the love that dare not speak its name” has witnessed a series of displacements in recent times, there is still a long way to go because a generation of people have to learn to be tolerant towards differences in general, and the queer in particular. In politics and administration, the law concerning sodomy has advanced from the 13th century British court to the Indian subcontinent and has been challenged recently with the Delhi High Court’s verdict to read down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. In short, this single historical event had the power, of course with the help of several

institutions – religious, cultural and social – to stigmatize and suppress any queer discourse for generations. Further, literary texts have been crucial in depicting queer lives. Apart from knowing our past and present sexualities and the thought process of an age, we also find documentations of how queer writers have been marginalized in numerous contexts due to homophobia. A cultural understanding of queer lives through literary representation is important in seeking the roots of the homophobic structure of society, as well as the presence and acceptance of queerness. The homo/hetero dichotomy remains crucial to the understanding of queer culture because the existence of the one highly depends on the other. The trial of influential people against the charge of sodomy, targeting books that represent gay and lesbian themes, and the way law, religions and social discourses position queer sexualities, are all indicators of the great amount of work that still remains to be done in order to create modern constructs of tolerance.

2.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Explain the origin of the term ‘queer’ in relation to other terms used to describe same-sex desires, and non-normative behaviours.
- 2) Give instances from a few literary texts that depict cultural and historical understanding of sexualities.
- 3) How is queer theory evoked to re-read literary texts of different centuries?
- 4) How were homosexuals treated in ancient Greece? Why is Sappho’s work important for the study of sexualities?
- 5) How does the study of law, religion and social discourses of a period help us understand our sexualities better?
- 6) Give examples from Indian literature to show how Indian writers have used homosexual or queer discourses despite severe legal or cultural limitations.

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