

A Study of Lesbian Desire and Identity in Mita Balani's *Breaking Norms*

Abstract: Desire and identity are basic and indispensable aspects of an individual's existence. Both entities contribute significance to our existence. The presence of these entities simplifies and improves our lives. Mita Balani's *Breaking Norms* showcases the journey of desire and acceptance of the identity of two young Indian girls Sonia and Esha, living in Mumbai. This paper tries to analyze their captivating lesbian desire, and the hurdles of accepting their identity, especially after coming out in a very subtle way. The lesbian community struggle to find understanding and support in this heteronormative society.

Keywords: Desire, heteronormative, identity, lesbian

In the literature, desire is more often explained in terms of human psychology and human society than as a theory. Desire and need are two independent human behaviour phenomena, but they are sometimes compared. Desire is often linked with sexuality. Identity has its own connection with it. Desire and identity are two basic yet essential parts of any individual's life. Renowned author Ruth Vanita¹ states in one of her interviews that Love, Desire, Identity, and Forbiddance are the most discussed questions in society and yet they are also the least defined. Literature has long been an unorthodox vehicle for changing and challenging the discourse around these issues. Claire Colebrook² (p.208) elaborates on the importance of 'desire' and 'sexuality' by stating One shall have to control one's desire, govern one's passions, and focus on body interactions; sexuality was as much about managing slaves and one's home as it was about self-formation. It is believed that here 'self' was male, and that had nothing to do with a person's sexuality. An individual's sexuality was not determined by their sexual difference or their sexual orientation. This 'self' does not 'have' a gender or sexuality because it does not 'have' any of those things.

Sexuality was considered more of power and governance. It was understood to be a relationship between a master and his slave. In the 1988, *History of Sexuality* by Michel Foucault³ he gives the various discourses in

which sexuality intersected whether with the Medical or religious discourse. The desire theory says that "fulfilling a desire makes a person happy, no matter how much pleasure (or pain) it brings." Identity, on the other hand, is always based on who or what a person or thing is. Identity theory is a group of ideas about how the mind and body are linked.

Humans possess inherent social tendencies, as seen by the manner in which our thoughts and actions are shaped by social influences. Furthermore, our cognitive and behavioural capabilities are developed through social construction. In the opening line of Book II of *Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir⁴, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" Here she clearly states that 'man' and 'woman' both the terms are socially constructed. Humans are called 'social beings' because heterosexist attitudes and behaviour are socially influenced, and their thinking and behaviour are socially created. Apart from this, it is true in which our ideas and behaviours are socially impacted. As time passes, a person's desires grow increases strongly as well and they have an increased need for validation of their identity. The heterosexist idea of heteronormative society has contributed to the construction of the genders.

Judith Butler⁵ in her work *Gender Trouble* tried to deconstruct the modern discourse of sexuality with a series of actions which is also called performance. The complex relationship between the female subject and the concepts of perceivability or visibility has consistently captured the attention of feminist scholars. The focal aspect pertains not alone to the visibility of women, but also encompasses the manner, agents, and rationales underlying their perception. Sexual identity politics often oversimplify the complexities of visibility concerns, particularly in relation to lesbian visibility. However, it is essential to recognise that the challenges related to intelligibility, spectatorship, and representation remain equally intricate within this context.

Author Mita Balani⁶ tells the story of two young Indian girls named Esha and Sonia who live in the city of Mumbai. Despite the fact that Sonia keeps Esha at a distance, the two end up falling in love with each other while they are still in college. Although Mita Balani was

born and raised in a small village in India, she has been a resident of the United States for a number of years. Due to the fact that some of Balani's work is inspired by real-life events, she made an effort to add a semi-autobiographical element to this piece of writing. The events that transpired in the life of a lesbian acquaintance who was a resident of the United States inspired her to write the novel.

The novel *Breaking Norms* (2017) is set during a period when Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code was regarded as a "unnatural offence" in India. In the matter of *Naz Foundation v. Government of NCT of Delhi*, the Delhi High Court issued a ground-breaking decision in 2009. Consensual sexual actions between adults of the same sex were decriminalized by the court, thus nullifying elements of Section 377. This decision represents a big step forward for LGBTQ+ rights in India.

The most important thing that happened was in September 2018, when the Supreme Court of India made history by declaring that Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was against the country's constitution. In the case of *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India*, this decision made it clear that the law doesn't apply to relationships between people of the same gender. It also reaffirmed the rights and respect of LGBTQ+ people. These legal developments in 2009, 2013, and 2018 reflect the evolving stance of the Indian legal system toward LGBTQ+ rights, ultimately culminating in the decriminalization of same-sex relations in 2018.

Methods

The research methodology employed in this study is textual analysis, with the theoretical framework of Queer theory serving as the foundational lens for the analysis conducted in this study. Queer theory is a theoretical framework that originated in the latter half of the 20th century, predominantly within the realms of gender studies and cultural studies. This work critically examines and dismantles prevailing notions of gender, sexuality, and identity. It provides a lens through which the researcher will analyze the texts, looking for insights related to non-normative sexual identities. The paper will cover and analyze answers to these questions.

1. How does *Breaking Norms* showcase the journey of desire and acceptance of identity for Sonia and Esha?
2. What are some of the challenges faced by the lesbian community in contemporary heteronormative society?

3. How does the impact of their identity affect Sonia and Esha's longing for love and overall psychological and emotional well-being?

Lesbian Love in Context to India; History

Giti Thadani⁷ in her work *Sakhiyani* states that Initially, lesbian practices and lifestyles are perceived as Western phenomena. The term 'lesbian' has no meaning in India. It does not exist because there is no Indian term for lesbianism.

Two scholars Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai⁸ in their book *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (2000), demolish the history of Indian written texts which depicts how same-sex relations are represented or expressed in writing. This book is divided into three parts: ancient India, medieval India, and modern India, and depicts topics related to love between men and women from ancient India to modern India. In the section on modern India, they discussed two significant events that occurred in India during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first was the emergence of a minor homophobic voice in precolonial India that had been largely ignored by mainstream society. The second was the increasing explicitness with which sexual love between women is depicted, whereas depictions of such love between males are nearly muted.

In the 1990s, three concurrent events upended the lives of homosexual and lesbian members of society in India.

Despite the fact that homophobic fiction is still being published in the 1990s, there has been an increase in positive portrayals of homosexuality in recent years. *Bombay Dost*⁹, a magazine from Bombay (Mumbai), was one of the first confirmed gay events in a long time. It was passed out in 1990. The main issue's main point was that it gave people a chance to talk about experiences and types of alternative sexuality. Sexualities that didn't fit the normal heterosexuality were called "other." At first, men and women of all kinds were included in the group. In *Bombay Dost*, it is shocking that lesbians made their first big public statement. In the magazine not only men but women too wrote up, followed by *Bombay Dost* "Sakhi" was brought for the talks and experiences of women's sexuality. Before, the word 'Sakhi' in some forms of Sanskrit meant a sensual and sexual link between women. Now, it has lost its sexual connotations and means friendship between women that is not sexual.

Second, at this time, the entire world, including India and many other powerful nations, was fighting the AIDS

epidemic. Initially, it was believed that AIDS was a 'Gay' disease or 'Western' import, and men who contracted it were required to be quarantined in a separate chamber. It was a time of great hardship for gay males in India. During the 1980s and 1990s, the AIDS epidemic prompted the development of new medical discourses on sexuality and the regulation of sexual practices. The portrayal of homosexuality in domestic situations in Rekhti's poetry, and Chughtai's novel *Lihaaf*¹⁰ was considered offensive and therefore prohibited. Yet, Suniti Namjoshi, a feminist fabulist and poet whose works were originally published overseas and subsequently republished in Indian editions, was one of the first writers to continuously write about lesbianism in English.

The third notable example of the emerging genre of openly gay writing includes the plays by Mahesh Dattani, the poetry of Hoshang Merchant, and the collection of stories and poems by R. Raj Rao, which have notably influenced the creation of a film by Riyadh Wadia.

It is not a mere accident that the film *Fire*¹¹, released in 1998, initiated a widespread discourse on homosexuality within the context of independent India. Notably, the movie portrays lesbianism within the framework of a conventional family environment.

Depicting Esha and Sonia's Desire and Identity

Mita Balani's *Breaking Norms* (2017) begins with the 'disjointed' relationship of Sonia with her husband. It has been almost a year since her marriage, yet she is not getting the love and time of her husband Rajeev. They had moved to New Jersey, USA soon after they were married from India. She is trying every day to please her husband, but she always gets disappointed. As Rajeev neither gives her time nor does he look after her moreover he is busy with his work often.

Years later Sonia met accidentally Esha, and the unsaid bonding, the un conveyed desire between the two emerged from there. The novel soon goes to their past connection with each other.

She scribbles a few lines while daydreaming about her,

"Your bright smile creates havoc in me.

The liveliness of your laugh touches my heart to the deepest.

Appearing in my dreams, day and night,

The sweet, emotional pain that you give me is beyond tolerance now.

I desire to spend life holding you in my arms.

I wish to relieve life being in your arms (p.13)."

These lines are forms of expression, transgressive desire, and explicit love for the heteronormative society. When Sonia as a young girl of seventeen realizes about her real identity and her views on love she is stopped midway by her best buddy Girish to read 'human anatomy' books.

The article "Perverse Desire and the Postmodern Lesbian" by Sheila Jeffreys and Teresa De Lauretis¹² contends that lesbian desire transcends Oedipus, mother, and father and sexual differences. It also claims that lesbian thinking should be inspired by love and pride in women and their bodies rather than masculine philosophy. The article challenges traditional ideas about lesbian desire by arguing that it is not an innate sexuality to be explored, but rather imagined and constructed in the practice of loving women. The article references two other works on lesbian theory: "The Practice of Love: lesbian sexuality and perverse desire" by Teresa De Lauretis and "The Lesbian Postmodern" edited by Laura Doan." Lesbian desire exceeds, goes beyond the binary terms of the Oedipus, mother, and father, and thus is not constrained by sexual difference" and "she does not 'explore' an already existent, innate lesbian sexuality, but rather imagines and constructs her lesbian sexuality in the practice – the pain and the pleasure – of loving women (p.8)."

Sonia sees and feels there is no wrong in her but the part of a heterosexist society like Girish always trying to mold her ways of looking and thinking to the world to change according to the societal normal and traditions.

The character and the lifestyle of Sonia if closely observed one could easily grasp the point, she always spends her maximum time with her 'male' Cousin Girish and his friend's group where all are 'boys', she doesn't have any friends from high school, she shares her things with Girish only. She used to be part of their all activities including 'sitting outside the school' to watch beautiful girls of their school and 'talk about them.' This is a major activity of this hetero-patriarchal society where the 'male gaze' is a part of 'passing comment' in day-to-day activity. Again, if these things are done by boys is fine but if a girl passes along with them is not acceptable, the same is a phenomenon with Sonia.

Another article "Introduction" by Noreen Giffney & Katherine O'Donnell¹³ provides an overview of the themes and subjects discussed in the file's articles and position papers, which span a wide range of Lesbian Studies topics. Genealogies and contextualising the field, readings and

desiring fictions, theories and disciplinary problems, identities and intersectionality, locales and interpreting “lesbian.” “Firstly, we wanted to place the term ‘lesbian’ at the center of analysis, whether as a materiality, concept, category of investigation, identity, political position or object choice (p.8).”

This study also explores the concept of lesbian identity, raising inquiries on the ongoing significance of the term “lesbian” as a descriptor of identity or political stance, the influence of intersectional perspectives on the construction of “lesbian” identities. The current state of being “post-lesbian” and the existence of an academic discipline known as Lesbian Studies also inquired by the researchers.

When Sonia finds and accepts her identity, she hopes to get support from her favorite go-to person however she receives the punishment of ‘the crime of an unexpressed love.’ Girish stopped talking to her in a way she should change herself as it is not acceptable again in a heteronormative society.

Professor Renée c. Hoogland¹⁴ in her work “Perverted Knowledge: lesbian sexuality and theoretical practice” explores the intersection of lesbian sexuality and theoretical practice. The author challenges the traditional concepts of sexuality and gender by questioning the heterocentric bias of much mainstream feminist thought as well as the re-reading of the “indissoluble knot” of sex and sexuality in Freudian psychoanalysis. As the author states, “Freudian psychoanalysis thus neatly aligns with such foundationalist notions as guarantee the maintenance of what is, to borrow the words of Teresa de Lauretis, ‘in most cultural discourses and sociosexual practices’, still a ‘gendered sexuality.’”(p.5) The author argues for a more inclusive and diverse approach to critical analysis that takes into account differences in terms of sexuality and challenges the gender binary.

Lesbian sexuality and identity are often seen and marked as ‘perverted desire’, Sonia expresses that ‘she is being submissive to be loved’, she tried to erase Esha’s memory in order to gain the trust of Girish.

The time of their meeting and expressing their love for each other by conveying with sentences like ‘an absurd desire to touch every inch of her, a desire to come close’, a desire to stay together always’, when these desires or the moment of love is written and enjoyed by heterosexual pair is always treated as ‘beautiful’, soon it changes totally opposite and bizarre with them.

Visibility of lesbians is so important in the form of their ‘coming out’ or ‘self-acceptance’, like the two young girls of different persona fall for each other, Sonia being a butch femme yet she cried ‘tears roll down her cheeks’ other side Esha a sensitive femme yet “she grip on her heart gets stronger day by day, hour by hour, every minute and every bit of each second (p.60).”

Impact of ‘Coming Out on their Lives Simultaneously

In *Epistemology of the Closet* Sedwick¹⁵ closely examines ‘coming out’ as a fundamental aspect of LGBTQ+ identity and knowledge construction. She also looks into how coming out challenges societal norms, has psychological effects on individuals, and contributes to the formation of LGBTQ+ communities. The essay highlights the significance of recognising the complexities and nuance of coming out as a significant aspect of queer experiences.

“The social construction of Heterosexuality” (1994) by Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger¹⁶ examines the sociocultural structure of heterosexuality and its influence on the formation and evolution of lesbian identity. It is observed that lesbians frequently express that their initial exposure to terminology such as ‘lesbian’ holds considerable importance in their narratives of self-disclosure. The report additionally emphasizes the hazards and perils linked to lesbianism within the context of hetero-patriarchy, a topic that is frequently disregarded by individuals identifying as heterosexual. Furthermore, the document highlights the limited efforts made by heterosexual feminists to thoroughly explore the potential for reestablishing a secure and unchallenged identity as a “purposeful political stance.”

The construction of this heterosexual society is majorly by the influence and terms of so-called heterosexual people who always have their beliefs and tradition, whosoever tries to change and go against their tradition and norms will be treated as ‘abnormal’ and sometimes they have to face the death for going against this society.

The ‘coming out of the closet’ of any queer’s life is one of the hardest periods so with, it takes courage, mental preparation, feel, and explosion to their lives. The secret about the sexuality of two lesbians Sonia and Esha was not out, not even they were planning to tell their parents or family. But the truth abruptly comes out in a very awkward position giving fingerprints of a ‘perversion’ lifetime. They were in a state of ecstasy, lost in their own worlds, in each other’s arms naked. Soon this state of

ecstasy changed into 'fear' and 'embarrassment' when her teachers found out about them. The beautiful life that they both dreamt of together vanished in their present situation.

"Breaking norms takes courage and sacrifice. (p.126)" One of the teachers said to them then she finally said "No matter what people say, no matter how difficult and painful the journey will be, I am who I am. (p.127)"

Madeleine F. Price¹⁷ in her article "Early Trauma, Societal Oppression and Coming Out" (2008) looks at the clinical effects of early childhood trauma on bisexual or lesbian clients, which are made worse by society and family stigma and oppression in childhood and throughout adulthood. It also looks at how these things can affect the coming out process. The paper gives a background for talking about two parts of the therapy process that show how the three factors mentioned above work together. The final goal is to get the client back into the world of whole-object relationships and to get them to stop staying away from other people because of trauma and narcissistic injury from the past.

Trauma always leaves its fingerprints harshly on the cheeks and the whole body inside of any individual, and the same with the characters, their lives change, Esha was forced to marry and sent to a foreign country. Parents generally do this for the sake of their honor, the pressure of this heteronormative society. Although Sonia fights, withing her family, friends, and society alone but the marriage of Esha breaks her inner strength, the reason to fight for society. Yet for some years she tried to make a group for the betterment and bring tiny changes in this hetero-patriarchal society.

Sridevi Nair¹⁸ in her article "A Record of Our Lives" (2011) analyzes the anthology "*Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*" and its contributions to the portrayal of lesbian voices in Indian literature. The paper claims that "*Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*" is the first lesbian work in field of Indian literature (English or other languages). The collection gives lesbian writers a platform to discuss their experiences and viewpoints, promoting lesbian voices in Indian literature. The anthology also questions established cultural narratives and official histories that have marginalized lesbian voices. The author argues that "*Facing the Mirror*" reflects and represents the actuality of lesbian lives in India, and that lesbian voices should not be embarrassed into pretending they do not present. The anthology's poetry, fiction, and personal anecdotes depict lesbian lives in India in a variety of ways.

Ellie Vainker¹⁹ in her article "Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics" (2015) primarily focuses on providing a compelling story about how activists and people who weren't activists made lesbianism in India go from being a secret and hard to talk about in public to a national issue.

Challenges within a Heteronormative Societal Framework

In *Queer Activism in India* by Naisargi N. Dave²⁰ explores the development of lesbian culture, activism, and community in India is discussed. This book tells the inspiring story of how lesbianism in India went from being illegal and taboo to being a nationally legible subjectivity via the efforts of activists and bystanders alike. In this book, Dave looks at times, places, and events that go far beyond the two years she spent doing research (2001–2003). The book is based on a wide range of sources, such as interviews, research in archives, and close readings of activist writings.

Ruth Vanita²¹ in her paper "Lesbian Studies and Activism in India" (2007) explores the history and current state of lesbian writings and advocacy in India, highlighting the challenges and successes of the movement including the impact of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, historical focus of feminist movements and take of an international organization on the lesbian movement. She divides the paper into three major challenges faced by the lesbian community.

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which makes homosexuality a crime, has reportedly been used to intimidate and harass lesbians, is one of the major and first obstacles lesbian campaigners in India confront. There hasn't been much opportunity for LGBTQ+ action in India's feminist groups because they've traditionally focused on changing laws that affect married women.

The second is that the government of India has taken a number of different approaches in response to the need for LGBTQ+ rights. In 2018, the Indian Supreme Court overturned Section 377, thus decriminalising homosexuality. However, the government has also been criticized for not doing enough to prevent discrimination and violence against those who identify as LGBTQ+ and for failing to offer enough legal safeguards for these people.

Third, it observes that international organizations have supported the lesbian movement in India. For example, the AIDS crisis led to increased funding for anti-AIDS organizations, some of which were focused on LGBTQ+ issues. In addition, the article mentions the existence of

chat rooms, websites, and listservs that connect South Asian lesbians worldwide. However, the author does not elaborate on the role of international organizations in supporting the Indian lesbian movement.

Sonia initially tries to 'join' her 'disjointed' relationship with her husband, but soon when she meets Esha, her love, and desire for each other grows and they decide to be with each other together.

Shamira A. Meghani²² in her paper "Articulating "Indianness": Woman-Centered Desire and the Parameters for Nationalism" (2009) highlights how Indian women face challenges in expressing their national identity as a result of the patriarchal structure prevalent in Indian society, which frequently places greater emphasis on male experiences and viewpoints. This can marginalize women's views and experiences in national identity discussions. Further, she claims that India's national identity is often founded on a restrictive definition of "Indianness" that excludes women and sexual minorities.

The paper also examines how sexuality and nationalism intersect in India and how lesbian identity is often excluded from mainstream narratives of Indianness. However, it ends up with an illustration of how lesbian women in India have been actively challenging these limitations and expressing their own "Indianness".

Both girls Sonia and Esha struggle and some out of their traumatic heterosexual marriages too and plan to settle in the USA only, as the story is set up in the year 2012, by that time Indian government has decriminalized homosexuality in India. They choose their path according to their will and reality.

Another scholar Suresh Parekh²³ on challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community states in his article "Homosexuality in India: The Light at the End of the Tunnel" (2008) that In India, LGBTQ+ people face legal and social problems, such as discrimination, harassment, and violence. In 2018, the Indian government decriminalized homosexuality in response to the fight for LGBTQ+ rights, but still a long way to go irrespective of go in terms of law protection and social acceptance. In India, there are many different cultural and religious views on homosexuality. Some religious groups accept it, while others do not. He also gives a brief history and cultural context of homosexuality in Hindu society. It also talks about how views towards gay people in modern India have changed over time.

Fights for LGBTQ+ rights are always there in India, from activists to community members they are trying hard for the real acceptance of them in society.

Conclusion

Breaking norms belongs to the growing issue of lesbian relations in Indian society. It deals with the problems of visible gender but marginalized identity, despite being visibly distinguished by societal prejudice. In the manner in which desires and identity are expressed and manifested, there is a personal, social, and political history. However, desire and identity are molded to suit social structures. Two major characters of the text settle in the USA giving a significant approach but at the same time negative aesthetic to the aspiring community members to settle down there due to the heteronormative Indian society. Same-sex marriage case is still in the court, they are fighting for their preliminary rights in their own country where they take birth. It is the duty of more heterosexuals to make this society more inclusive and accepting of any gender, class, sex, or race of people. Only then a nation will grow and bloom. □

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Received: 9 April, 2024

Revised: 24 May, 2024

Accepted: 26, June, 2024

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