

# The Creative Launcher

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## Can the Gay Writer Speak? The Politics of Merchant's *Yaraana*

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### Abstract

The paper seeks to locate the politics of Hoshang Merchant's ground breaking anthology—Yaraana - gay Writings from India. Through a close reading of the texts, and the status of the contributors the paper traces the politics of the text. Drawing from a variety of approaches ranging from Wilde's utilitarianism to Foucault's analysis of power, the paper argues that Merchant strives more towards a homonormative world order, which forecloses the subversive potential of queer writing. Such a position however risks pathologizing the queer subject as they are closely related with the anti-gay genocidal nexuses of thought that populate cultures. The divorcing of gayness, a political position, from homosexual practices is therefore an overlooking of the obsolescence of this theoretical framework, which plays back into the nature vs. nurture debate, and locates queer practice as simply a sexual preference, and entailing no questions of identity, and therefore giving a lie to the various variant discourses of identity politics that emerge in the everyday life of a homosexual individual. This position of denial would closely conform to the minoritizing view referred to by Sedgwick. Hoshang also closely parallels Gide in rarifying art as an imitation of life, following from the Arnoldian notion, and thus an essentialist assumption, locating art completely within the bourgeois 'good art'.

**Keywords-** *Queer, Gay, Multiplicity, Canon, Genre, Homonormative, Essentialism*

'Yaraana'- Gay writings from South Asia, is an anthology of male queer writing, popularly called Gay writing, published in 1999 alongside its contemporary: Facing the Mirror – Lesbian writings from South Asia. The anthology decenters the normative notion of an anthology by incorporating diverse genres: short stories, autobiographical excerpts, non-fictional essays, poems and plays. The idea as Hoshang Merchant, proposes in the editorial, is to dismantle the notion of a watertight sexuality or sexual persona, and thus taken to its textual conclusion evolves into a multiplicity of genre, as much as it indicates a multiplicity of subjectivity. However, such a claim demands investigation into the politics that underlie the evolution of such an anthology.

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Any anthology is a political act in itself as it raises the question of exclusion or inclusion. More specifically anthologies are attempts at canonization, at defining what is representative of a particular epoch, to borrow from Foucault, and what can be interpreted as a legitimate discourse and what not. Harold Bloom points out the importance of canonization through his theory of anxiety where the artist unconsciously misreads his precursor and thereby artistic work is a product of intertextuality. Kolodny following the early wave feminists – Gilbert and Gubar, points out that a canon of female literary writing is required to allay the feminine anxiety of authorship. The canon is not just restricted to an abstracted literary realm, but in fact canonization is a key element in structuring the authorial habitus with respect to the literary field, and therefore shapes a lot more than public opinion, structuring the discourse of reality as life imitates art. This accounts for the constitution of the anthology of gay writing. A further question that arises from the question of anthologizing is the question: who should be entrusted with the task of formulating it? The question raised then is a tricky one, that of constituency: does it take one to know one, as Sedgwick suggests. Can only a gay person identify and judge gay literature, aesthetics and politics of queer cultures? Or is literature independent of such inflections? The question is a question of representational politics - who can speak for whom.

The question has been dealt effectively by feminist inquiry and extended by other subaltern literature like resistance literature, and Dalit literature. Feminist authors like Simone de Beauvoir pointed out that unless the marker of differentiability between masculine and feminine is taken into consideration, the result amounts to an obviation of feminine identity. Sedgwick also points out that the debate on nature vs. nurture tends to reinforce a western fantasy of a pre-queer culture. A simpler analogy might be drawn from a hypothesis of compiling an anthology of women writing with a male editor, it would immediately touch the chords of discrimination and misogyny with the implication a woman editor can't be entrusted with the job. Similarly, to overlook queer academicians like Hoshang, and allow an anthology to be edited by a non queer editor would tantamount to not only homophobia, but would silence the queer subject.

It is interesting also to compare the anthology with its companion Lesbian anthology – Facing the Mirror. Facing the Mirror is thicker in size and most of the contributors are not only little known names, but also conceal their identity choosing only to reveal their first names or aliases like Saggita and Pia, unlike 'Yaraana' which features well known writers like R Raj Rao, Firdous Kanga, and Vikram Seth. Since both 'Yaraana' and Facing the Mirror classify themselves as Writings from South Asia and India respectively, the implication is that the anthology would cater to literary writing or writing which can be classified along the major genres viz. essay, poetry, drama, novel, and non-fiction. Yaraana fulfills the category perfectly, as all the works included have been published prior to their

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inclusion in the anthology. What conclusions can be drawn then from this marked difference in execution?

The primary conclusion then that can be drawn from the difference between exposing and concealing the contributor's name, is that the women contributors are not eager or comfortable with a public familiarity with their sexuality, while as the contributors of 'Yaraana' are more comfortable with their sexuality. This dichotomy can be explained through two viewpoints: following from Wilde's appropriation of the perverse and negative, the women subvert the normative tendency to associate art with authentic experience of the authorial figure, and refract this authenticity by concealing to create a distance between the author and work, thereby displacing it. By this view 'Yaraana' would be less transgressive than 'Facing the Mirror', as the latter possesses a greater destabilizing force. The notion of comfort also raises a question from a feminist perspective. The preface to 'Facing the Mirror' by Ashwini Sukhtankar points out that the voluminous and diversity of narratives emerges from the fact that it is difficult to get women writing and even more difficult to get lesbians writing. Patriarchal discourses privilege masculinity over femininity, and public space is marked masculine from which feminist space must be excavated. (Sukhtankar) The anthologies therefore point out the dialectic between aesthetics and politics, and the question of privileging one over the other. Does aesthetics then subsume politics or otherwise? Yaraana privileges aesthetics over politics, while 'Facing the Mirror' privileges politics over aesthetics. It follows then that since masculinity is privileged, gay anthologies can afford this subsuming and expect works to fulfill the criterion of literariness.

The contributors to Yaraana are gay, despite the protestations of the editor, as the subtitle: 'gay writings from South Asia' declares; and derive their identities from it. However, as Bourdieu pointed out, the literary field deals in a cultural capital that is predetermined by the habitus, in which the artist is located. The habitus here is that of an educated empowered middle class that occupies an intermediary position between economic prestige and intellectual prestige. The writers are occupants of this class that is well provided with both economic and cultural capital, an intersecting position from which one can continue with roughly equal possibilities, towards the pole of art and economic security. Most of the contributors like Ali, Rao, Merchant, or Seth are or were established academicians in prestigious universities, or renowned literary figures like Adil Jassuwala, Bhupen Kakar and Mahesh Dattani, or in well-established careers like Owais Khan or Ashok Rao Kawi. This class can afford to come out of the closet and express their sexuality without any fear of homophobic backlash; class subsumes sexuality. This affirms Sedgwick's assertion that queer inquiry must also account for the phenomenon that one form of disempowerment can be simultaneously empowered in another field. So the disempowered gay writer who is trying to assimilate himself into the bourgeois canon, while rejecting its binarizing morality is simultaneously disempowered because it is excluded from societal acceptance. Yet, he is

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empowered through his English middle class education that allows him to coexist in a bourgeois setup as academia or literary society.

This contradiction or the underlying tension structures the whole anthology in its reluctance to fix itself upon one orientation or a single interpretation of sexuality with dyed in blue queer fluidity in the stories of Rao, and a homonormative trend in the works of Ashok Rao Kawi. It is interesting to observe how these fissures are manifest in the preface by Hoshang Merchant itself. Hoshang rejects the notion of gay as belonging to the political realm that has no affinity to the actual sexual practice, or any artistic world view. Quoting Octavio Paz approvingly that “gay liberation and women’s liberation are political movements and have nothing to do with human liberation (which is the precinct of art).” This single assertion appears sufficient for Hoshang to dismiss the term as nonsense.

This is a singular contradiction of the whole phenomenon of canonization that Hoshang has set out to set in motion. The non-political nature of sexual practice is an attestation of the essentialist/constructivist position that gayness is an acquired position, while homosexuality is the authentic natural irreducible base that transcends theorization. Such a position however risks pathologizing the queer subject as they are closely related with the anti-gay genocidal nexuses of thought that populate cultures. The divorcing of gayness, a political position, from homosexual practices is therefore an overlooking of the obsolescence of this theoretical framework, which plays back into the nature vs. nurture debate, and locates queer practice as simply a sexual preference, and entailing no questions of identity, and therefore giving a lie to the various variant discourses of identity politics that emerge in the everyday life of a homosexual individual. This position of denial would closely conform to the minoritizing view referred to by Sedgwick. Hoshang also closely parallels Gide in rarifying art as an imitation of life, following from the Arnoldian notion, and thus an essentialist assumption, locating art completely within the bourgeois ‘good art’. Wilde through his creative privileging of art over ‘real life’ foreshadowed Bourdieu’s notion that good taste and good judgment is a social function and related to social positions or more precisely are themselves acts of social positioning. The anthology itself attests this view by including ostensibly straight works of writers like Firaq Gorakhpouri, on the basis that the social constraints forced the works to be couched in a heterosexual language. The notion of authentic art, then does not reconcile with either the operative logic or the textual practice of the anthology.

Hoshang proceeds then to locate the ‘homosexual’ in India within the Hindu shame culture. The term merits a brief explanation. A shame culture relies on a shaming of the individual on account of his transgression, a social exclusion without any moral compunctions, and therefore entails a privatization of the transgressive act like any sexual activity, and hence the heterosexual horror at gay cruising in public places. A guilt culture, unlike the shame culture, possesses maximized potential of homophobic violence, as it relies

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on a moral abomination of the transgressive activity, and thereby accords a moral justification for censuring the transgressor. While Hoshang may be correct with regard to the practice of male homosexuality, extending the same to the whole spectrum of homosexual practice is harder to justify. The female homosexual practice is judged from a moralized point of view as it combines the gendered responsibility of the patriarchal discourse, with a challenge to the patriarchal supremacy that is the cornerstone of South-Asian cultures and Indian culture is particular.

Moreover, Hoshang appears to satisfy himself only with a certain abstracted culture that is familiar to him, owing to his Bombay Parisian elite culture. There are significant pockets of India like the North East, that can't be classified under the mainstream Hindu culture. Do these cultures also exhibit the same benign shaming, or do they subscribe to any different discourse. Hoshang mentions the Muslim homosexual's guilt owing to strict injunctions against non-martial sex, but doesn't elaborate on whether this manifests in the crystallization of a guilt culture. The same could be said about a large Christian culture in the North-East, where the biblical denouncement of same sex consummation must produce its own peculiar contradictions too. Hoshang is silent about these specific exclusions and prefers a generic Hindu shame culture. It is also surprising to note that though the book is envisioned as a compendium of queer writings from across South Asia, the editorial doesn't dwell on any other geographical space other than India. Countries like Sri Lanka represented in ShyamSelvadurai's *Funny Boy*, or Thailand renowned for its infamous Lady Boys find absolutely no mention in the discussion. Recent books like *Gaysia* by Benjamin Law have outlined the gay subcultures that flourish all over Asia, but Hoshang seems to be content with only a description of Bombay upper class homosexual culture.

The exclusion permits Hoshang to devise an ill-conceived defense of homosexuality that precludes transgendered population from the realm of any artistic or intellectual investigation. Homosexuals, he argues, are often confused with eunuchs or the hijra, who possess no sexual organs and can't sustain erections. This immediately others the transgendered subject, with the failure of his erection excluding him from the authentic homosexual identity. Hoshang is clearly anxious about the pejorative view of male homosexual performativity, in literal as well as Butler's terms. The heterosexual marriage is structured around the penetrating male and the penetrated female. A non-performance w.r.t. the roles is located outside the realm of normativity, and therefore subject to sustained social and medical gaze, hence the mushrooming of multiple discourses around penile dysfunction, premature ejaculation and other related issues of masculinity. Hoshang's anxiety to rescue the homosexual from this effeminate realm, and place him as male proper panders to the hetero-patriarchal discourse that is closely linked to the gay genocidal outlook, outlined by Sedgwick. The discourse of exclusion is justified by some unique Freudian analysis, by routing homosexuality to a dominant Oedipus complex. This psychoanalytic interpretation is

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immediately followed by a contradictory elaboration of Butler's performative theory, who blends deconstruction, psychoanalysis and constructive gender theory to evolve a unique theory of sexuality in *Gender Trouble*. She contends that gender is a social performance, an internalization of the gendered habitus, and thus there are no innate genders that would other same gender eroticism, which is perceived as a negation of gendered roles.

This notion of performativity is linked to the role of MTV culture in representing a misconstrued performance of sexuality, by foisting upon the youth the plastic eroticism manifest in women like SophiyaHaq and Alisha Chenai, leaving no room for an exploration of the same gender erotic interaction underlined in *yaraana* or same sex male bonding. Further, the negative portrayal of same sex eroticism by the media in the form of the lunatic fringe of western homoerotic culture acting as a metaphor for the whole homoerotic culture, has reinforced the inimical effect of MTV culture upon the homoerotic culture. In practical life, the most ordinary people can be very homoerotic. Hoshang prefers the term 'gay' for this ordinary populace, which is in stark contradiction to his earlier assertion that ordinary life, the subject of art, is not concerned with politics of representation. This glaring contradiction is left unexplained as the narrative shifts to the consequences of this doubling of heterosexual discourse: the presentation of women as proper objects of erotic desire b) projecting homosexual subcultures within representations of violent lunacy. The upshot of this discourse is that while it has encouraged homosexuals to come out of the closet and increase tolerance and acceptance of queer sexualities, yet by a perversion of the homosexual subject in cultural conceptualization has made him more vulnerable to increased homophobia, and thereby force closet homosexuals to be on the defensive. It has also led, according to Hoshang, closure of any exploration of sexual identities in many young men, who have been prematurely forced into heterosexual relationships.

Underlying this assumption, however again is an attempt to privilege homoerotic culture by pointing towards the gestural economy trades in bourgeois heterosexual performance, through the agency of mass media. The performativity of heterosexual performance, if destabilized, through excavating an alternative truth manifest in its plastic women, is aimed at underscoring the discourse that heterosexuality is nurtured rather than an inherent naturalized identity. Yet at the same time, by this criterion, it assumes that homosexuality is a 'natural' phenomenon concealed, in the vein of Gide, by heterosexual discourses. This phylogenetic argument, is an attestation of the same nature/nurture debate, and leaves no room for examining queer cultures from plural and multi-capillaried sites, as the transitivity of same sex relations demand. The closet is a particularly problematic site, and the silences adopted by the closeted homosexuals needs to be further investigated within peculiar historicized discourses of marriage, convenience, identity obfuscation, economic and political institutions, rather than ahistorical cultural transmission only. These silences must be interpreted in terms of the circumstances and contingencies which are articulated in the

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matrimonial cultural interplay, rather than dismissed acting on the impulse of queer fundamentalism as acting in consonance with heterosexual pressures. Also the MTV culture is again articulated only in a particular segment of India – the urbane class with sufficient cultural and economic capital to interact with the symbolic capital generated by the MTV cultures. A large segment of India is not located within this culture, and are deprived of the most mundane and basic cultural capital, as Mahashweta Devi's short stories like Daulati- the Bountiful observe. How does this class articulate its same gender desire? Hoshang neither qualifies his observation with an affirmation of such limitations, nor ventures to investigate the socio-political articulations of same gender desire in such cases.

However, he points out a valid schism between the gay population and women, echoing Sedgwick that queer investigation is not consistent with gender studies. Theoretically both are located on the right hand victim side, hyper-masculinity being the other binary. A radical kinship should have emerged then, as both would be sympathetic to the other's powerlessness, and the deprivation of cultural capital. In social practice, however things are far from being so as gay men and women emerge as competitors for the male. Empowered women, also can be co-opted by masculine hegemonic structures such as university administrations to concretize their empowerment by partaking in the heterosexual male othering of the gay man. However the gay man also can partake in the same binarization, emerging from the right side to the left hand side i.e. dominated to dominant, by participating in a heterosexual marriage, while continuing with the pre-marital homosexual lifestyle. The patriarchal discourse implies that the woman is not authorised to investigate into the lifestyle of her husband, but rather concentrate her energies on procreation, and management of household duties.

Such duplicity introduces another level of complexity into the investigation of homoerotic lifestyles, which would render any debate on nature vs. nurture that Hoshang outlined in his investigation into MTV cultures, unstable and untenable. For how do we distinguish homosexual masquerading as heterosexual from heterosexual pursuing the homosexual for economic (heterosexual prostitution involves a capital transference), or political reasons (censure the homosexual by assault) or other contingencies that exclude women (jails, monasteries, same sex hostels)? The question is a valid one, and can only be understood through an understanding of the political networks that shape these discourses, the disciplinary networks that produce technologies of governmentality or technologies of self-esteem inflected in the lives of queer populace generally and queer populace in particular. Hoshang offers little by way of his contradictions.

After having questioned the role of cultural discourses in shaping sexuality, Hoshang prefers once again the essentialist view that sexual orientation is a 'natural phenomenon' quoting Genet that "I had no more choice in my sexuality than a Negro does in choosing his skin color." The conflation of sexuality with racism, is particularly problematic for while skin

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colour immediately outs the Negro, sexuality is a far more complex phenomenon, especially considering heterosexuality is the default sexuality, and it needs a 'coming out' of this domain of naturalized sexuality, a negation of the discourse of stratified presumptions from a zone of performed acquiescence where the queer subject participates in the discourse formulations. To what degree, sexuality implies an autonomous alignment along the grid of sexualities is debatable and contentious, as Sedgwick and others have pointed out, yet the 'declaration of sexuality' involves an autonomous element in a lesser or greater degree. Rather than simplifying the paradigm of sexuality, by deriving on a transparent analogy, the analogy only serves to articulate the opacity of queer subjectivity that escapes any panoptic social or critical gaze.

The narrative appears to be cognizant of this opacity, even as Hoshang does not seem to be aware, at least not consciously. This is evident in his lament against the reluctance of the gay literary elite to come out of the closet, and therefore refuse to be published in a gay anthology. Hoshang problematizes this refusal as symptomatic mainly of the fear of homophobia. The issue of a gay label being restrictive in terms of thematic flexibility and target audiences, doesn't cut much ice with him. Hoshang grieves that there are not many like, Anais Nin who would "stand up and speak about their condition and how they overcame it through art" and stressing the transcendental function of art, albeit within a parenthesis: not politics, but art. Art is denoted therein as a vehicle to transcend the destiny of gayness, a vehicle to experiment beyond anatomy.

However, this approach doesn't take into consideration, the contradiction manifest in such an approach. For while coming out is a function of independent agency, the circumstances attending it are not, a whole grid of artistic, political and societal factors structure this autonomy of agency. Consider for example the case of Agha Shahid Ali, whom Hoshang attacks in an essay as having refused vehemently to be a part of the anthology, even while living a comfortable gay lifestyle in the states. Agha's refusal to out himself cannot be construed as a function of homophobic fear or even internalized homophobia, but is a product of a completely different social interaction. Raised in diaspora, Shahid like every other diaspora writer assimilated the lost original motherland in poetic text. However, unlike any other diaspora poet like Darwish, Shahid did not possess a transparent one-dimensional relationship with the homeland that became evident during the turbulent nineties. As a scion of an orthodox elite *shia* family staunchly pro-India, the secessionist anti-India movement that arose presented a chance to redeem himself from the strong homophobic guilt, and at the same time assert his independence from the strong paternal influence in the form of Agha Ashraf, one of the earliest educationalists and topmost bureaucrats in the valley. The Country without a Post Office' is not only a protest against the Indian state's atrocities in Kashmir, but also a protest against the overbearing familial legacy that outlawed his sexuality, and concomitantly his nationality. His projection of himself as a nationalist poet, is a negotiation

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between a strategy for acceptance as well as a kinship with the suppressed Kashmir on account of his double deprivation: from an 'authentic' sexuality and authentic 'nation'. A coming out would make him unacceptable to the Islamic Kashmiri liberation discourse, and shut the possibility of acceptance. Therefore, his refusal to be included in the gay anthology is not a simple fear of homophobic violence, but rather a complex negotiation between the self, social and the political, in a space created by a discourse alien to him, in which he played no part and yet that he occupied only through his absence.

This complexity is again reproduced in the Sufi homosocial bonding, and its distinction from pederastic practices like *nazaril'al-mardorshahidbazi*, wherein an erotic contemplation of young beardless boys was considered an act of reaching out to, and simultaneously attesting the magnificence of God. How far can love remain an idealized love, without any sexual overtones, is a question that yields no easy answers. The case of Mir Taqi Mir, advanced by Hoshang, is a case in example: his father was followed by a Sufi in the streets, and became the teacher of the young poet when he was brought to the house. How can this murshid-shagird, or teacher- student relationship be reconciled with this element of same sex social desire, even if we were to keep eroticism out of it? Is it a simple case of homosexual desire concealed in quasi-religious terms? "Sufism seeks oneness with the universe through spiritual exercises that lead individual consciousness to dissolve into the cosmos. But nothing is more narcissistic than the contemplation of the cosmos, for if we become one with the cosmos, what we love in the cosmos is simply an idealized image of ourselves. An idealized self-image is also what attracts the aging lecher to the adolescent boy. That is the secret of Sufi as well as other pederasty, for pederasty is an extreme expression of self-love. That is the conventional psychiatric view; Freud for example wrote of the "basic narcissism of the vast majority of pederasts ... proceeding as from narcissism, they seek their own image in young people." (Sufism, sodomy and Satan: Sexual Dysfunction In Islamic Mystic Tradition ).

Scholars like Ruth Vanita and Salim Kidwai, would contest this interpretation of same sex love as inherently homophobic, and failing to take into account the fluid and complex nature as well as practice of Sufi Islam whose resistance to normative stratified religion, is akin to a resistance to normative binarized sexuality, and constructing a child subject by appropriating all speech, silencing the perverse desire of the child completely. Where do these two conflicting narratives reconcile? The answers can only be excavated, but not decisively, through a detailed engagement with social and textual history. Hoshang provides only a claim supported by no arguments, yet the claim is too substantial to be rejected totally. The claim that art is divorced from politics, or that the art represented in the anthology is purely aesthetic involving no political baggage is misplaced. For while Yaraana certainly represents a subsuming of politics by aesthetics, yet this subsuming is a product of class politics. The English gay writer in the anthology might profess the notion of Kantian

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disinterestedness: production of aesthetic or intellectual pleasure through art rather than emotional pleasure acquired by non-artistic consumption. The literary field, to again move back to Bourdieu is a social universe where cultural capital is accumulated, and the possession of cultural wealth determines whether or not one is a true writer. Bourdieu extends the notion of 'capital', beyond materiality to social, cultural and symbolic wealth. Cultural capital specifically includes non-financial social assets that promote social mobility beyond economic means, which include education, intellect, and style of speech, all of these assets are class markers. The gay writer in the anthology therefore trades in cultural capital, to offset a political discourse of acceptance and simultaneous rejection, where the bourgeois heterosexual reader is at once challenged and excluded as an Other, incapable of renting out the textual space offered by the narratives, yet at the same time is offered an opening into the gay textual circuit, to try and understand the gay view point, and reconcile with it, if not accept it. Hoshang's delineation of art from politics in an attempt to transcend the practicalities, is therefore an instance of bad intellectual faith. The category of autonomous art is a product of social positions and by extension rooted in the societal articulations, rather than transcending them.

The preface therefore must be read as symptomatic of the tensions manifest in the contemporary queer discourse that vacillates between a borrowed constructivism (Ashok Rao Kawi) and a Foucauldian discursive individualism (Rao). The anthology, in 1999, just at the turn of the century marked a discursive shift in the Indian English queer writing, from being located in the tabooed underbelly of the literary world to an eruption, a mobilization and advancement too full intellectual gaze, a sign that India could no longer use the ruse of Victorian morality to overlook the burgeoning homosexual consciousness that rose from the ashes of Victorian suppression to claim its former antique acceptance, if not glory. As Hoshang remarks: Every nation has a historic moment when it comes into consciousness and bursts upon the world's consciousness. Such a moment has already been defined by their literatures for India's women and Dalits. The anthology, he remarks, defines the historical movement for India's homosexuals through their literature, old and new, heroic or pedestrian, lovely and lovelorn, or rough and ironic" (Merchant). While the anthology is intended with a south Asian focus, and so the focus on India jars a bit, and the representation of India must be limited to a particular social class, credit must be given where due. The anthology was a ground breaker, as it constituted a watershed moment in the recognition that queer literature possesses an individuality that makes it worthy for investigation, even if its editor suffered from bad intellectual faith

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