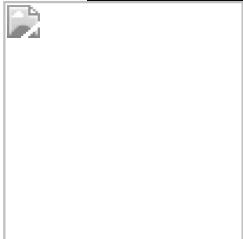
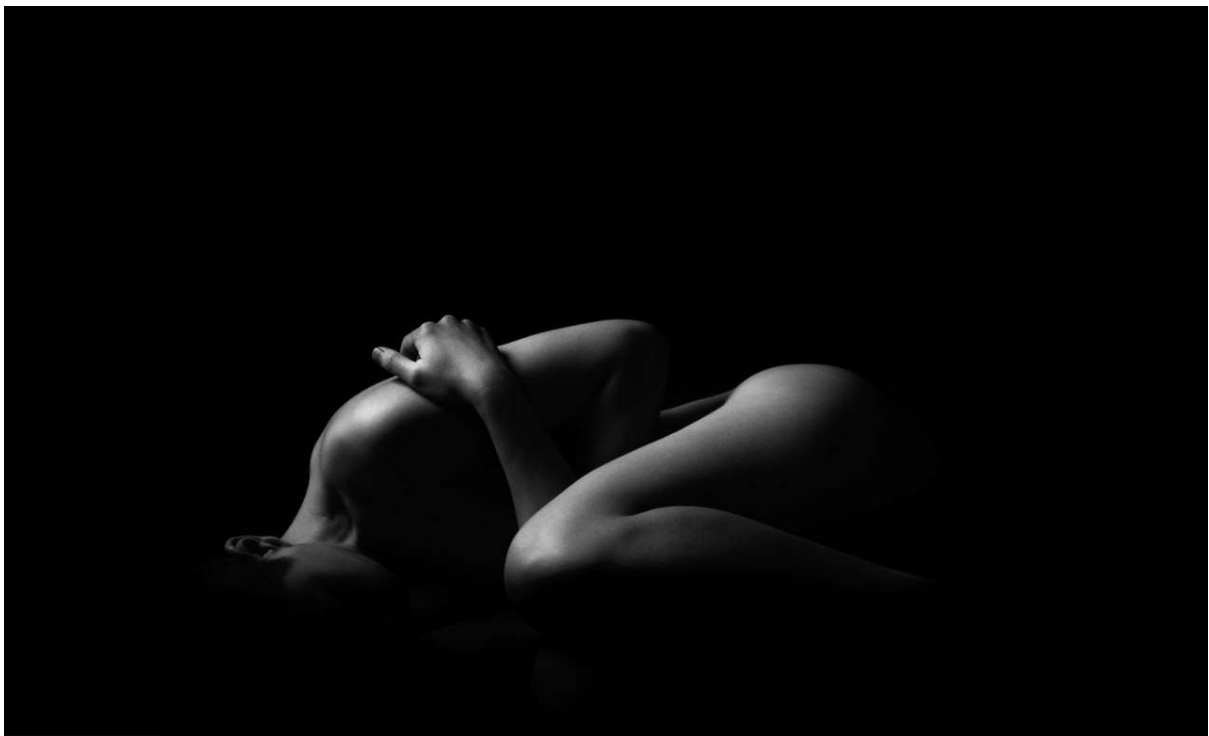


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NON-FICTION/ESSAY

Politics of Sexual Identity: How Contemporary Indian Literature Dispels Any Need For Differentiation



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Feb 28, 2021

As a democratic nation, India has had some limited progress in protecting gay rights. How its massively differentiated and traditional society has adopted and tolerated this moral enjoinder is another matter. Certainly, acceptance is as important as legal recognition. But how are the politics faring at the individual level? One of the best media for feeling a nation's political pulse is not internet or television but literature. Two current Indian authors exemplify how, at the personal level, some sexual politicking has already succeeded, in some social realms, by almost disappearing from the narrative.

These authors, Saikat Majumdar and Janice Pariat, have reached beyond self-conscious gender identification into a more deeply human world. They are enough beyond LGBT politicking, some may say they are privileged thanks to the hardworking shoulders of politicizing giants. But maybe, I suggest, such is the point of the giants' labor.

Politics and Literature

The underlying debate is not new: Before complete revolution, should you wallow the modest laurels won or

keep up the identity fight in literature and art? Should the personal still fight and politicize?

Literary response to landmark political developments can be explosive and rich, sometimes merely crumbling and weary after long struggle. Think of the explosion of the arts in revolutionary Russia. Similarly came the volcanic rise of exciting new prose and poetry in the late Soviet era in Eastern Europe, including Milan Kundera and George Konrad. Yet after the Iron Curtain's fall, the exciting voices seemed to calm and take a nap. There was the South American literary upheaval of the 1960s up to the 1980s and beyond, with dozens of moving, ingenious works and authors. Certainly, political tremors rippled throughout that continent upon hopes the numerous autocracies starving the nations would topple. Although political advances have been made there, much remains. But the literary eruption has spent much of its lava (not to deny that fine work continues to appear).

The highly exploratory literature and cinema of post-World War II Western Europe was traceable to both exhilaration of getting past that catastrophe and reformulating a new organization of the subcontinent.

The current strengthening rise of Indian queer literature comes trapped in another political earthquake that of the religion riots in cities and in states such as Kashmir. Both

major political upheavals are interrelated. They both have roots in the troubling, racially differentiated society that sincere democracy has a hard time cracking.

Solid works and authors have appeared, from R. Raj Rao and Farzana Doctor, to Devdutt Pattanaik and Anita Nair, among dozens of others. Much Indian queer lit, like that in other parts of the world, is concerned with how central characters, usually gay, differentiate themselves from others. But must a work be so steeped in a consciously differentiating identity, in order to qualify for a member of the genre? I wonder whether this differentiating outlook must hold. If not, then queer lit itself need not differentiate itself from the wider range of literature. Otherwise, it may undermine its own status of being differentiated. In turn, it may compromise the openness that the political movement demands of society at large. Inclusiveness or exclusiveness — what's at work? Which is desired? Let's not rush headlong.

The Theater of the All-Too-Deep Pleasure of Human Touch

I look at just a few very contemporary Indian works that exemplify not an identity-timidty but subtlety and

recalcitrance in their handling of differentiation.

Differentiation comes off as hardly an issue. There is no question of coming out in these works, as there is nothing given to come from or go to but only to remain as is, undifferentiated. Some readers may find such a tack a political insult.

The earliest of these novels is Saikat Majumdar's *The Firebird* (2013). It tells of the theater life via a close-third-person narrative following the pubescent Ori. His father is a bon-vivant and mother an increasingly desperate actress. A steady intruder and nuisance in the theaters, Ori spends much time where she plays.

The theater world is renowned for being highly sensuous, probably necessary to sustain its particular kind of social art. Not mere sexuality but all the senses buzz and scintillate in the theater. Thusly must the stage scintillate: to conjure the brilliant human world into the proscenium's shadowy lit-up interior and nullify the audience's stubborn incredulity. Although the senses of sight and sound are ever-abundant, the ever-present tongue and its buds deliver taste. The slithering and ever-shifting bodies and poses reek of touch, spreading like a current through the atmosphere. Even odor is sprinkled throughout, via the sneers and ecstasies of the characters.

Sensuality, as all the hard moralists of history, thumping their gavels, warn in trepidation, is the gateway to hell. And the life of the theater, as Ori witnesses without moral comment, is a fiery hell of its own.

Indeed, this Calcutta theater scene, like his mother's life, goes up in flames — without the narration's least judgment of it. The tale is reportage, not condemnation. It tells of a world that tells about us in our world that we think is *the* world. The story is of a higher-level parallel universe contiguous with the theater's on one hand and this tangible universe on the other.

Yet, this thespian universe, sensual backstage and suggestive on the boards, is not expressly non-heteronormative. Permeating through the sheer scrim is what may be the most powerful of our senses, when it comes to forming and understanding the human being: touch. How so human? Consider what humans are: mammals. Most mammals bear their offspring internally and provide milk to the newborn — who *must* have this juice. They, thereby, share a cuddly proximity with one another special to their taxonomic class. Even powerfully social-insect species appear not to emphasize cuddling and hugging. (Some birds cuddle, notably penguins and parrots.) Hence cats' loving to rub, dogs to lick your face. Mammal fur and its deeply nerve-sensitive roots accentuate cuddle pleasure. Humans are among the most

hairless of land mammals. But their skin retains the sensitivity heightened by the sparsity of the heavy fur, which blocks as well as stimulates. While most mammals hug their young for weeks or months, humans do so for years.

Humans transfer this continually needed experience to select peers. As journalist Valerie Lahoux reports in the magazine *Telerama* (issue number 3673, 02.06.20, p.18): “The sense of touch is essential for our wellbeing,” There is an entire research institute devoted to it, the Touch Research Institute in Miami, founded by Tiffany Field, with over 400 studies conducted. Good-quality touch even helps reinforce the immune system.

The theater, in its sensuous quest, only accentuates this deeply human need.

The Firebird reveals this facet of sensuality through innuendo, hardly bringing attention to itself. Hence Ori's longing just to touch the ticket-taker:

Staring at her, he realized why the workmen were always trying to touch her. She had firmly etched features and a skin with a dark angry glow.

He touched her face. She was real. Her skin was soft and rough at the same time... She was perfect.

She was Lila. (46)

The synesthesia only highlights the role of touch. Ori's sensuality of touch easily translates — to the innocence of the sensed as well — to home:

Before going to bed, Ori combed and brushed his grandmother's hair. Every night. He loved to play with the grey white strands. (50)

The synesthesia can mount and amplify and inter-define to the point that Ori seems touched in the head, like the reader touched in the heart. The synesthetic touch defines the actor and character as much as the species.

The Sandesh were delicious, and as he chewed on each piece and felt them melt in his mouth, he suffered pain, the pain of glorious taste enjoyed not in the shadow of his home, but in the yellow heat of the streets, listening to the rickshaw-pullers cry out to clear their way. (35)

All the major senses boil out from the pot of feeling, freed from the shame at home that keeps the senses from exploding, as they can in the world beyond it.

But touch reigns in this limelight world. And it does not ever lose sight of its mammalian erotic interweaving. The theater world has indeed sloughed from its oily back the wider society's rulings and yearnings to rigidify touch. Touch cannot be caged, even in solitary confinement. That outer world cannot grasp theater's reflecting universe. In the theater, personal identity dissolves in the synesthetic turbulence, washing away feeble gender, even age differences. It extrudes a basic human substance. All that matters is these basic human substances, even if the individuals do not quite consciously assimilate the situation.

At ten, he [Ori]] was deeply ashamed of his growing body; he would not sleep shirtless during the hours of night. He stepped back a little, away from the man. The man came closer, reached out to touch the collar of his shirt. 'I'm older than your father. You can't be shy with me.'

He stood limp, letting the man's fingers unbutton his shirt. His ears felt warm and his brain clouded with the intense fragrance of spiced betel leaves. He would not fight a man who wanted him for the stage, He let the man remove all the buttons. even stretched his arms so that the shirt could be eased off his body.

'Very nice complexion.' The man looked pleased. 'It will glow in the spotlight.' (8)

And nothing more happens. No Harvey Weinstein moment. Ori here aspires to the stage, but he never sells a rupee of himself. Any violation is not a legal one, just Ori dealing with his early-adolescent shame. There is no question of heteronormative or non-heteronormative. There is simply touch of two souls willing in their ageless way.

The Ashram's Natural Touch, Well-Extended

Majumdar's *The Scent of God* (2019) takes up touching not merely as a theme in the book but practically forming the whole narrative drive. The word "touch" appears 61 times in the novel. It takes place in an ashram boys' school, the classic environment for development and explorations of non-heteronormative relations. These are also not captured by the label heteronormative. The touching among the characters is frequent, vivid, jealous, loving and wholly devoid of a sociopolitical label. It exists in a kind of timelessness as beings removed from history.

The main character, Anirvan, also in a close third-person like Ori in *Firebird*, is a good friend of Kajol. In fact, Anirvan worships Kajol, who has the strength and character that Anirvan feels he lacks, while both are quite up to par in school. Curiously, Kajol in turn appears to admire Anirvan deeply, although it is hard to say exactly what Kajol feels beyond being worshipped. In the opening scene, a tight dark roomful of students watching cricket, Pakistan vs. India on television, the role of touch between these two is revealed right away:

Anirvan unfurled each of Kajol's fingers slowly inside his palm, like he was playing a secret game of numbers with his digits. (4-5)

Here, Anirvan is in control as he almost always proves to be. Their touching arrives erratically during the day, with no question of shame or need for any label for their actions. It is only a way to reach evermore into another, as if an integral part of the religious environment. There, all the rituals are carried out faithfully in form, while content is found in the flesh — in the body and senses of the real world. Anirvan is so attuned to the rituals that he learns to assimilate and imitate them in an uncanny control. In fact, he is soon agreeably surprised to hear Kajol nickname him Yogi, the spirit-master of control, the router to nirvana.

The opening chapter continues the undifferentiating innocence:

Kajol had smooth, well-trimmed nails. Anirvan ran his fingers over them and imagined his tiny nail-cutter tucked away carefully inside his desk where everything was arranged like a library catalogue. (5)

Further in the text, the touching becomes more involved, to the point where, to many people, it may not seem “touching”. There’s an accretion of that sense, through the course of the story, with greater and greater intensity and passion. It’s enlightening to view this progression:

‘Turn your lips into an O,’ he whispered. He reached out with his fingers, touched Anirvan’s lips, shaping them like he was trying to curl open the petals of a flower. (9)

Anirvan wanted to touch him [the character Kamal Swami], become him. (20)

There was something about the ashram that, Anirvan knew, was like lying on his grandmother’s bed, her fingers parting the curls of his hair. (20)

They closed their eyes. In a daze, Anirvan slid his fingers down and felt the heat of Kajol’s hardened penis. He felt safe, and at peace. (50)

Like a snake, his hand traveled down to Kajol’s shorts. His penis was hard and awake and came into Yogi’s hand eagerly. Yogi knew how Kajol liked to be touched. Kajol’s body had told him, and he had learned easily.

As Yogi pulled the zipper down and held Kajol’s penis tenderly in his fingers. He wanted to kneel and take it in his mouth, eat him like food. (167)

Pushed against the wall, her [Renu’s] body shook with laughter, an undulating river. She squeezed his exploding penis in her palm, wrenching the tip between her thumb and forefinger. ‘My big little man.’ She had whispered. Fingers laced with killer strength. (184)

Today Yogi and Kajol’s hands did not touch but breathed on one another. Their hair brushed against one another. Softly, they played, across Kamal Swami’s taut saffron robe. (231)

Tenderness of touch melds into a tender violence:

Entranced, he followed [Remu] to a room upstairs where she flung him onto an aged sofa, and without bothering to close the door behind her, sucked his young neck in the darkness of the room, her saliva warm and slow-moving on his skin. Intense pain fought the sudden need to wet his

pants, and his heart beat so fast that he sensed his death was near. Her right hand crept between his legs and the softest palm closed over his penis, harder now than when he had the fullest bladder....[She] quoted dirty lines from Jacobean poetry till she took his penis in her mouth and he had to throw his weight against the wall to keep straight.... (197)

Sexuality is removed from politics even while politics swirls around in the form of the Communist Party. There he finds Renu, to which sexuality serves as a concomitant tool of impassioned struggle. It also remains gender-undifferentiated, not mere bisexuality but pan-sexuality. A childlike sexual cosmopolitanism. It retains a purity that politics can besmirch, if one lets it. Anirvan innocently, but hardly naively, does not let it.

The Lightness of Terms and Differentiation

The term “bisexuality” or “mere bisexuality” does not capture the experience here. Some people have voiced that bisexuality is treated as the least serious of LGBT. But what these characters experience seems to elude even

“bisexuality.” Their experience is more about the most basic human substance that existed far before formal politics hit the scene in human prehistory. It is the substance that made humans human. To that extent, the very idea here may outrage some readers and believers. Many people, gay or not, may find something immoral, a self-indulgence, in this line of innocence that the author never judges. Consider again Yogi’s love of playing with his grandmother’s hair.

Non-differentiation almost needs no politics. Or it is the stowaway on politics’ ferry that has leapt ahead to the far shore, long before the boat. That boat often only scorns the very idea of landing.

By sneaking a place aboard, such a complaint of complacency and indulgence may be leveled against Janice Pariat’s *The Nine-Chambered Heart* (2018). Each of the nine chambers belongs to a lover of the unnamed female central character and is narrated by that lover. That central character is steadily moving across Eurasia, to cities vaguely labeled “the city without a river,” “the city with a river,” and so on. Each affair has a start and finish. And each loving is sincere and dedicated until circumstance, not hate or abandonment, ends it. But each love remains intact in its heart chamber. The first chapter’s love already poses a social risk: a male student of the central character.

But the characters barely fret the risk. Another love is female, and the story makes no particular noise about the fact. In fact, like much of the novel, the love is so subtle as to make the gender identification purely implicit. *“I am in love with you by way of deepest, most profound friendship.”* (p. 77) The two had already been friends. Their coming to love one another is not so much a move into a new realm as it is a reasonable growth given the real world they already inhabit.

Much of their closeness comes about by their capacity to share stories of previous loves without falling into jealousy. One of the two had a previous love die — thus the chapter title “The Undertaker.” This new love helped her bury this death. At times, their love hints at its own sensuality being indirect, abstract, hypothetical.

As we slide down on the escalator, we watch the advertising squares glide past us...

She’s gorgeous,” I say of the woman in the picture. She’s wearing a lacy purple bra and panties. Curvy and soft, ripe with fulness.

You agree.

“Would you like to fuck her?” I ask.

You lean closer. “Many, many times.” (78)

As in Majumdar’s theater, this bit of theater hinted in the escalator can be as real in its imitation as the world it imitates — if not more so.

This abstract love has loads of tactile firecracker never quite seeming to get lit — but all the more powerful in its pure promise. And the merest touch becomes volatile as paint thinner.

Often, I think it’s preferable, this constant anticipation. Being perpetually on a pleasurable edge... Maybe it’s the only way to retain it. Love. To never have it happen... The one imagined kiss is worth a thousand real ones....

Your fingers graze mine, intertwine, and you don’t release them. (78-79)

It is almost impossible to discern whether the two lovers of this chapter are of the same gender; I even feel at risk in deciding the two are women. But why should the answer here matter? No question of differentiation arises because the characters are living beyond such an issue. You can say they are living the dream in a gender-free land.

Touch, in Pariat, is the trail to love. In Majumdar, it is love. Pariat’s loves are successive; Majumdar’s are not so

much promiscuous, with that label's judgmentalism, as generous, joyful, all-loving. In both authors' work, undifferentiating is personal, not political. But here the personal is made political only to the point of saying, I aim only to be and to love. Let those who can, do. That's the point of the politics. The political has then become personal by living the point and the end of the politics.

Or these authors may be beyond their time.