

**THE FAMILIAL ARMAGEDDON: A STUDY ON THE NOTION OF
LESBIAN IDENTITY AND THE FAMILIAL STRUCTURES IN *FACING
THE MIRROR* BY ASHWINI SUKTHANKAR**

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Abstract

In 1999, an anthology was published by Penguin Books that was capable of undermining the safe illusions of heteropatriarchy and the heteronormative family as the centre. Even though It was titled *Facing The Mirror: Lesbian Writings from India* and was the first of its kind in India it failed to be noticed by the mainstream culture. This paper is an investigation into the representation of the lesbian identity in the anthology and the portrayal of the familial structures in its many forms. Family being the locus in social and cultural life of an individual as well as in emergence of the notion of an identity, an analysis into its dynamics as a site of contention for lesbians or as a sanctuary from the assaults of the homophobic society or as a support for ‘deviant’ sexuality is required.

“In the late 1960s closets opened, and gay and lesbian scholars who had up till then remained silent regarding their sexuality or the presence of homosexual themes in literature began to speak.”(Ryan 115)

Gay/lesbian studies developed out of feminist studies and feminist theories that engage itself with the theory of gender as a social construct and a system of signs or signifiers that s designed, implemented and solidified by the established social structures and organisations and not biologically essential. Once feminist theory had managed to expose the constructedness of the humanist idea of a stable or essential selfhood and substituted the poststructuralist idea of the gender as a set of shifting signifiers, questions of sexuality as an innate or essential category also became open to reformulations. Thus emerged Queer/gay/lesbian studies as a discipline and an academic extension of a political movement that had begun in the early 1980s.

The Indian academia waited even longer to open the closets and still remain half-closed. Queer studies as a discourse continues to stumble in an academic dimension in India as dialogues on homosexuality and other ‘deviant’ sexual categories have occurred mostly on non-academic levels. In India Homosexuality, lesbianism in particular, has often been regarded as a myth which means that many sincerely believed that there are no lesbians in India. This may be an

advantage when woman-woman relationships are not viewed with suspicion as long as the sexual nature of the relation is revealed. On the other hand this invisibility generates illegality and illegitimacy and prevents any possibility of legal recourse to fighting discrimination and harassment.

This research paper is an undertaking to subvert this mythologisation through a critical analysis of the representation of the familial structures in the anthology *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* edited by Ashwini Sukthankar in 1999. A rich collection of lesbian writings from India and the first of its kind in India the anthology was chosen for its cultural and political value.

Published as it was in the aftermath of Deepa Mehta's lesbian themed film *Fire*, the anthology, when reviewed in the popular press was either given a customary praise or accused of being vague and "not polished enough to be dubbed literature" (Menon). The misconceptions and illusions regarding lesbianism are apparent in most of the reviews themselves. One critic claims that the "belligerence that is so often associated with this genre such as group sex, wearing rubber, flagellation, fetishes and other sadomasochist acts are conspicuous by their absence" (Dhiman). He proceeds to speculate the reason for this and finds "inhibition and fear of censure" as possible reason for this.

Compiling *Facing the Mirror* was, according to Sukthankar, an assignment that required perseverance. Emerging out of the safe fold of obscurity into the harsh spotlight and encouraging others on the same path was no mean task. Sukthankar contacted women she knew and many she had never met before, writing letters and meeting them in person. Some of the pieces were written in English, some were translated from regional languages and yet others taped. Some of the Indian lesbians themselves raised objections to the project on political grounds. Some of them maintained that verbalising and thereby materialising the existence of Indian lesbians would only cement the rupture between lesbians and heterosexual women.

The initial justification for the undertaking was the distorted images, caricatures and stereotypes of lesbians accumulating over time. The anthology intended to be a mouthpiece for the hitherto voiceless fraction of the society. The mythologisation of lesbians in India ensured that their appearance on the national and cultural scene as an entity with political ramifications would require demanding challenges. Sukthankar attests, "...what an effort it was for us to convince ourselves of our own existence, let alone others" (Sukthankar xvi). The lack of history and the subsequent horror of that first moment of recognition, "the perilous feeling of being the only one" (xvi) did not help either.

The ninety nine narratives of the anthology exist "in the free confluence of fiction, essay, poetry and memoir" (xvi). The narratives are by women from all walks of life including well established writers whose identity is disguised. Through their writing, these women engage differently with the term lesbian, lesbian desire and lesbian politics. "The diversity of our points of view, the range of our experiences, the dissention we choose not to hide, help us define any simplistic attempt to define lesbian life" (xxi) as the project attests.

Divided into six sections, the book attempts an amalgamation of the fragments that constitute life. The first section, 'Passages', describes the moment of awareness, the hour of decision and the transitions in the lives of the authors. Though the moments of pain and the terror of confronting the unknown are many the euphoria of possibility stands out in this section. 'Home', the next section, brings together stories of how a perceived sanctuary becomes a confinement and a source of constant tension and at times a silent support and of how the contributors negotiate their sexuality with their families. 'Worlds' show how the writers navigate

the world defined as they r by their sexuality; the roles they play at work and in the society as in Gauri's 'The Bi-Line' (152) and Preeti's 'The Score' (164), love across geographical barriers as in 'To One Who Went Away' (174) by K.K. this section also includes an investigation into the representation of 'Lesbians in Indian Texts and Contexts' (217) and another by Giti Thadani on how 'Silence and Invisibility' (149) has been used as a strategy to keep lesbianism under the tutelage of heteropatriarchy.

'Differences' is the section that that helps the anthology to resist a monolithic use of the term 'lesbian'. This section exposes the internal contradictions in the lesbian community and the divergent perspectives and lifestyles. These include nonconformists to the discourse concerning gender identity that validates the strict demarcation of the two genders, those that question the idea of monogamous relationships as 'The River' (241) by Shaka clearly proclaims, those that justify sexual practices assumed to be deviant like sadomasochism as can be seen in 'Loving To Hurt You' (237) written under the pseudonyms 'the slut' and 'the whore' and transsexual identified writers like Sophie who writes 'Will I Ever Be Free' (257). The penultimate section 'Connection' aims at highlighting "the groups, the networks, the friendships"(xxxvi) among the lesbians. The final section, 'Love' necessitates no elucidation. It contains the celebrations of love and passion.

The self-proclamation by *Facing The Mirror* as 'lesbian writing from India' demonstrates a simultaneous attempt to posit the work within globalized discourse of lesbian sexuality as well as to distinguish themselves from it. The foregrounding of the term 'lesbian' situates the work and its politics in a globalized context of sexual identity politics while that on 'India' underscores a specific regional context that refrains from merely repeating or drawing from global ones. Though the term 'lesbian' is itself problematic as some reject it for its White or Western significations, while others consider it too politically loaded and yet others find it narrow and restricting; Sukthankar underlines that the term is used for and in the anthology "particularly because it is so uncompromising" (xx)

Queer studies as a discourse has become an established approach towards undermining the sanction of heteropatriarchy as the normative familial structure. Throughout the anthology the heteropatriarchal family emerges as a site of tension and apprehension to the lesbians and rarely as a source of support in the otherwise homophobic society. A sanctuary from the assaults of the social system of accepted sexuality, the family can also be quite uncompromising of its heteropatriarchy, with its severe monitoring of sexuality and the incessant demands to marry. This ambiguous disposition of the familial system is apparent in most accounts of the relationships between the lesbians and their parental homes.

In spite of this common thread of ambiguity and validating the tenor of the narrative that finds unification in fragmentation, the manner in which each contributor negotiates the familial space is unique. The heteropatriarchal family is constantly reshaped by the lesbian reality as can be seen in 'The Letter' (90), a fictional narrative by Kanchana Natarajan in which the protagonist's husband and parents are under constant tension to contain her lesbianism, and simultaneously the lesbian by the family.

The notion of the identity and the individual self being moulded by the dynamics of the familial structure generates memoirs in the anthology that articulates the influence of family in their choice of sexuality. The account by Preeti 'Coming to Women' (36) testifies that that the insensitivity and the disregard of the patriarchal figures of her family was a factor in her choice of sexuality. Women juggle to balance the twin realities of being parents and being a partner causing extreme stress leading to adversities in the women's relationships. The women manage

to deal with the ramifications of break-up and the question of the custody of children without resorting to legal measures as the memoir ‘One and One is Three’ (79) by Radhika illustrates and also portraying how the entry of her adopted child changed her perspective to the extent that she was ready to give up her sexuality for her son. This memoir thus negates the objection that some lesbians had against the anthology; that it solidifies the differences between the lesbians and those who are not. It shows one of the many common strains between the lesbian and the heterosexual woman—the absolute devotion to her child.

The familial structure encapsulates the established structure of parental patriarchy, the configuration of a family the women try to create with each other as a space of their own and in some instances it also includes the marital family of husband and kids. The parental family emerge as a system of confinement in most of the narratives and so does the marital familial arrangement as Shama testifies in ‘The Lamp Kept Burning’ (124). The lesbian familial bonding fails to be acknowledged by the heteronormative family and when acknowledged is sabotaged actively. Seema’s ‘Toward a Lesbian World’ (334) is a case in point where the uncompromising attitude of her parents led indirectly to the death of her partner. There are also rare instances like Supriya’s ‘Tired of the Broom’ (121) where the heteronormative family becomes an asylum that encompasses the lesbian family. In this account, Supriya and her husband’s first wife Lakshmi create a family within the family and find a retreat from the assaults of the outside world under the thin veneer of heteropatriarchy.

The lesbian family subverts the ideologies and power structures that are basic to the heteronormative family. An arrangement based on an egalitarian symbiotic relationship without the encumbrance of legal contracts with the relationship lasting only as long as there is understanding between the participants is juxtaposed against the patriarchal relationship that becomes customary after a while with no chance of respite due to the twofold weight of the legal contract as well as the unwritten contract with the familial structure. This autonomy sometimes acts as a cause for the short lifespan of the lesbian relationships apparent in many pieces of the anthology, the primary cause being the uncompromising position assumed by the homophobic society and the subsequent assaults on the lesbian family.

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