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Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 37: Hoshang Merchant

BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

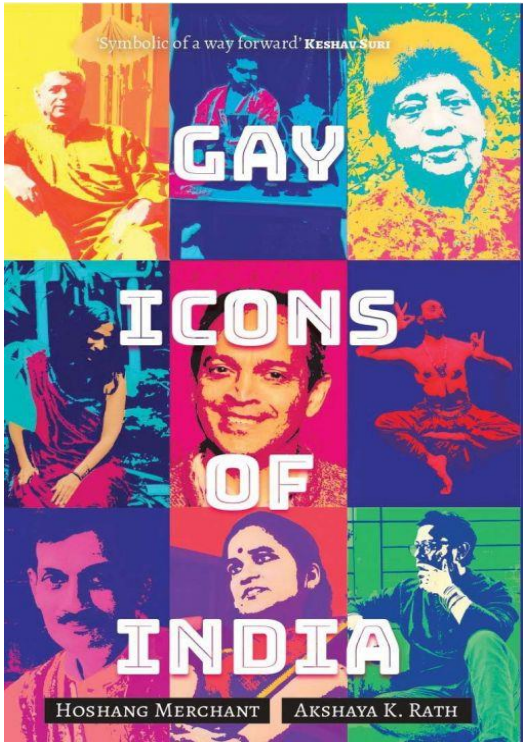


Voices from the Margin

- Indian Writing in English assimilates all kinds of writing.
- It is not confined to dominant discourse alone.
- Meta-narrative has been challenged by ‘little narratives’.
- Different voices from different discourses have come out.
- Queer Writing, Dalit Discourse, Tribal Literature, etc. have been much in talk.
- These voices need our special attention because they are still marginalized in some way or other.

Queer Writing in Indian English Writing

- Queer Writings started in India during 1990.
- The theme of homosexuality is not taboo now. People from diverse background are writing about this frankly.
- Even though homophobia is prevalent in our society, the normative approach to sexuality is challenged in this discourse of homosexuality.
- Some prominent names in the field of queer writings in Indian English Writing are Hoshang Merchant, Suniti Namjoshi, Ruth Vanita, Eunice de Souza, Salim Kidwai, Vikram Seth, R. Raj Rao, Firdaus Kanga, etc.
- *The Lion and the Antler*- First Collection of Queer Poems by Shaleen Rakesh



Contd…

"Of the writings that lay the foundations of Queer Literary genre in India, *Yaraana: Gay Writings from South Asia* (1999) edited by Hoshang Merchant, *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writings from India* (1999) edited by Ashwini Sukthankar, *Same–Sex Love in India: A Literary History* (2008) edited by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, Ruth Vanita's *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West*, and Hoshang Merchant's *Forbidden Sex/Texts: New India's Gay Poets* (2009) deserve to be mentioned specifically since these writers have ventured out to break the silences, to point out to the self-willed neutrality and secrecy about homosexual people and their lives that a race has so tactfully managed to maintain over the years. These seminal works are indeed works of literature that attempt to speak about issues that concern homosexual people to reclaim an equal space into the mainstream."

-Chhutan Dey

Hoshang Merchant

- ✓ Born in 1947 as Hoshang Dinshaw Merchant in a Zoroastrian family in Mumbai.
- ✓ Masters from Occidental College, Los Angeles.
- ✓ Studied Buddhism and Sufism, taught in Germany, Iran, and Jerusalem.
- ✓ He was a Professor in Hyderabad Central university.
- ✓ Poet, novelist, critic, translator, academician and activist.
- ✓ Referred as the first openly acknowledged queer poet.
- ✓ A prominent voice of queer writing in India.

“Literature has no sex and poems have no sex organs. There is only good writing or bad writing.” -Hoshang Merchant

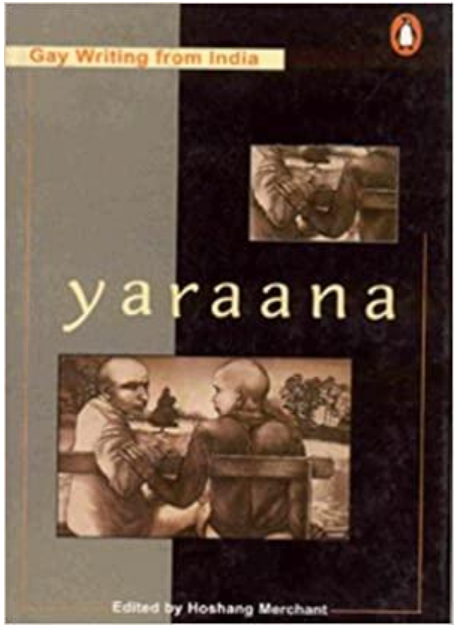
General Themes of His Poetry

- Voice of the ‘voiceless’
- Autobiographical details and search for identity
- Challenge to sexual binaries
- Quest for love
- Amalgamation of love and spirituality
- Challenge to social dogmas
- Quest for freedom

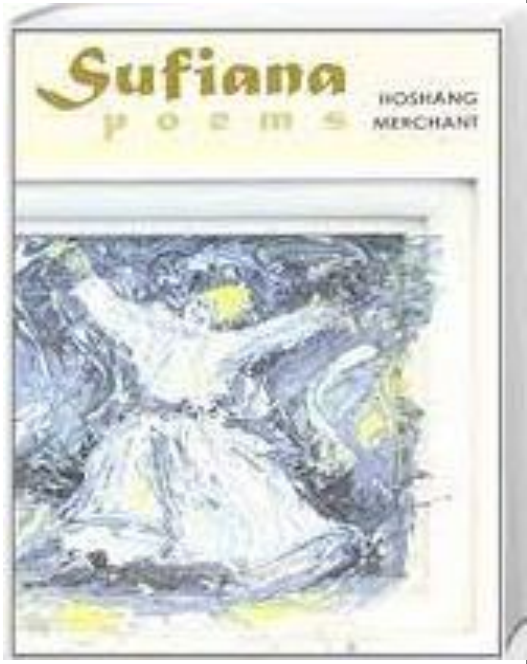
He calls himself “a male homosexual Parsi by religion, Christian by education, Hindu by culture and Sufi by persuasion.”

His Literary Corpus

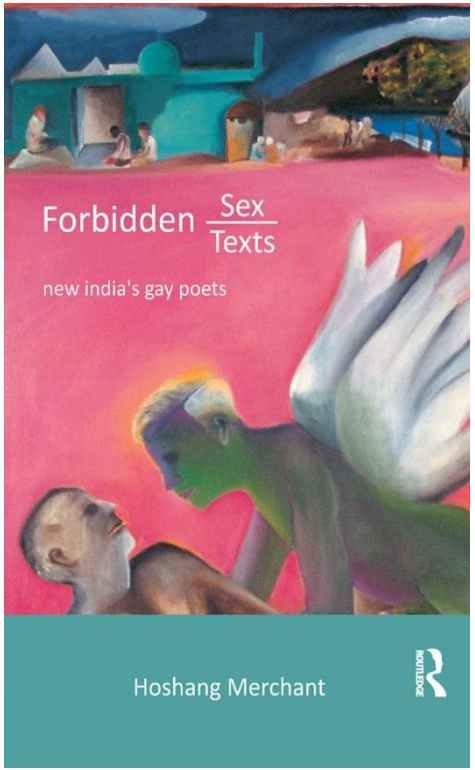
Poetry Collections



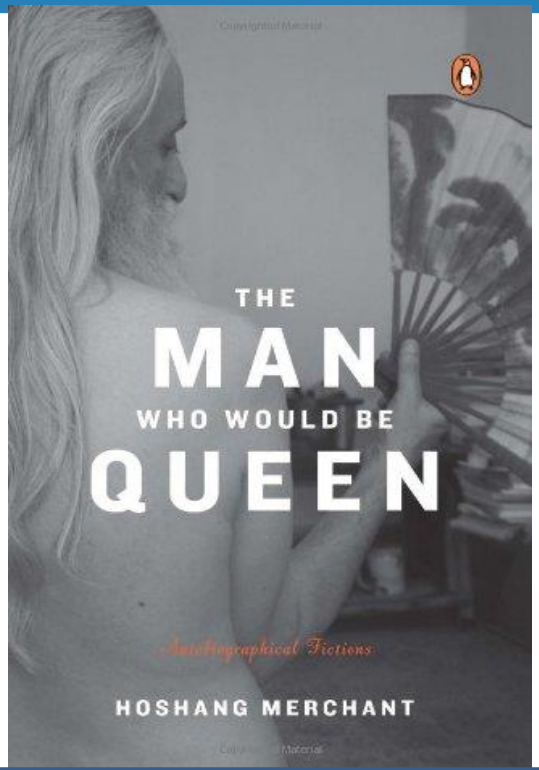
- *Flower to Flame* (1989)
- *Stone to Fruit* (1989)
- *Yusuf in Memphis* (1991)
- *Hotel Golkonda: Poems 1991* (1992)
- *The Home, the Friend and the World* (1995)
- *Jonah and the Whale* (1995)
- *Love's Permission* (1996)
- *The Heart in Hiding* (1996)
- *The Birdless Cage* (1997)
- *Talking to the Djinns* (1997)
- *Selected Poems* (1999)
- *Bellagio Blues* (2004)
- *Homage to Jibanananda Das* (2005)
- *Sufiana: Poems* (2013)- Collection of 54 poems.



Contd…



- Novel
  - *The Man Who Would Be Queen* (2012)- an autobiographical fiction
- Collected Works
  - *Forbidden Sex/Texts* (2009)
  - *Indian Homosexuality* (2010)
  - *Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia* (1999)- a seminal anthology in the area of gay writing in India.



"As everyone knows by now, I'm a homo-sexual. To write this sentence and to speak publicly, which is a great liberation, is why I write."

His Views on Poetry

“…….poets have no axes to grind. Their objective is the poem itself. However, we poets have to ‘abstract' our experience to fit it to the reader's experience. We all share the same space/time. Some great poets make their own space and their times. It comes as a surprise to know Whitman, Melville and Dickinson were gay. We do not know them as gay poets but as Transcendentalists even after 150 years. This transcendence is a poem.”

(In an Interview with Meena Kandasamy)

Contd…

A whole race with its hand in pockets
A something an eye can't see but a whole race knows
And keeps to itself… (Alif Alpha)

Each on has his own dream over coffee
The chef dreams about America
The waiter dreams custom
I dream about the waiter.

Poetry is a way to use language without colonizing words
Poetry is away to liberate words
I cease being a colonizer, I became a free man.
('My Love' for Ashfaque)

My hatred of my father led me to this Love
Of boys and men, saints and sinners.
("Couplets written with blessings of Feisal Chisti,Nampally Dargah"L 2-3)

Sufiana Poems

- ✓ Fifty-four poems
- ✓ Language of sexuality
- ✓ Religious yet sexual imagery
- ✓ Bhagsu Nag, Krishna and Radha
- ✓ A self-purifying journey
- ✓ Images of Rumi, Ghalib and Derek Walcott

My lovers say I'm looking for a poem
My students say I'm looking for god
But I'm neither looking for lover nor poem nor god
But for Death which is all of these. (p.49)

Today the boys
are at their Sunday bath
I watch them strip to the waist
And plunge heedless, headfirst
into the pond, newly born
Their wet limbs ripple
in the morning sun
As their loincloths fall
in coils to the floor
Beads of water fall like rainbows on
stone And the snake in paradise
is aroused once more: Jai Shankar!
Jai Jai Bhole Nath!
("Bathers at River Bhagsu Nag,
Dharamsala," pp. 80-81)

“Scent of Love”

It is raining a small rain
A gentle rain over all the world
Gentle like that love which is so hard
to sustain or to receive or to reciprocate
Because men are greedy: They bite and tear

You from the mountains I from the plains
I from the city You from the forest
I a hunter And you a deer
The city is full of the smell of my dear today

The musk mingles with the rain
Its scent spreads
This morning I lie in bed dreaming of you
I was to be hunter but I'm an inert deer

Contd....

Sensing danger you wait
And I sense danger with you
Why is the world so crazed for venison?
I wonder at a living creature
Who must so eat a living creature!

And suddenly the wounded doe dies for you
She has dragged herself to you to die before you
Her stag
Did she not stay one night inert
When you slew her in bed
Just as tonight I wish to slay you?

Contd….

Does not our passion only bring suffering
And do we all not die daily a little
Satisfying our longings?
Play, go play though your scent drives me wild
And I have myself become wild in my love for a wild thing

Slay or be slain
And your hand will not be cleansed of blood ever again
The pain the pain of love is everywhere
And the scent of this musk cannot be washed even in a rain.

From "*My Sunset Marriage*"

The world is the stuff of dreams
of martyrs and madmen
Palestine
Ahvaz
Iran burned
Go to the burning ghettos
With kerosene and water
Pour alternately over the fires
to lengthen the funeral drama to the pyre
I, poor H.M.
burning, burning
Burnt to cinder
Come back with a begging bowl! (The Ballad of Poor H.M. p 58)

“My Sister Takes a Long Long Time to Die”

It was the dark of winter
When the illness came like a thunderclap
They isolated an Indian girl in the Chicago snow
Hoping this Indian disease would go away
But it was America that had killed her
The sickness in us is named America
And the long long time of waiting does not die.

She had waited long in the dark of her lord
The lord she called father who never had a kind word
The lord who giveth and taketh away
(And now is the time of taking away)
The man she calls lord and manservant
The lover with fair hair and blue eyes
Who ferries her hither and thither like Charon.

Contd…

My sister, she hangs by our slender thread that cannot snap
Because the long long time of waiting is never dead.

And she called Death, as her brother
Brilliant, charismatic death
Death who loves and beguiles and kills
but does not beget
Death the brother who no sister in life can wed
That unfulfilled love, that great longing that does not die
That long long time of waiting never dies.

Contd....

And now in the brilliance of summer
of melting light and butterflies
She floats between dark and light
As on a river a swan doubly glides
One half flesh; one half shadow
Sister and brother
Reality and reflection on one river.

She has crossed life's flood on a reed
She awaits a boat now to ferry her to the other side
The long long wait she waits for all of us will never die...

Krishna Imagery

And we are all brides
The coils of the serpent
are now the coils of Karmic Time
Or the circles of skirt: of dancing Sufis
Men become women in the face of Father Time
Let the threshing floor
be the dance-floor
Let the dance-floor be my grave
I dance on death's serpent-hood
I lie face down in the street
in the summer heat (Kaliya Mardan: Prologue; p 177, Sufi Tree 2008)

From ***Hyderabad Quartet***

Walking down the street of bangle sellers
Pleases the woman in me
Everyone is Radha, everyone Krishna
Some bhang-drunk are Narsimha in choler…
There is no man or woman
Only the god of love
Sweet death! (HQ 41)

Sudama's eyes filled with tears
And his hovel a mansion appeared
He'd never left home
Only invited a friend into his heart.
(HQ,254)

As an Indian English Poet

- He has played a crucial role in establishing courses on Indian Gay Literature in Indian universities.
- He always writes against the hetro-sexual normative discourse of our society.
- Use of Indian myths and mythological characters like Shiva, Krishna, Gopi, Radha, Sudama.

"My task as a writer was to give tongue to the dumb ones.
The beautiful boys I have loved were always too silent to tell
Their story. I spoke for those who couldn't speak.
I was reprimanded, always, for talking too much."

(*Hyderabad Quartet*)

My lovers say I'm looking for a poem
My students say I'm looking for god
But I'm neither looking for lover nor poem nor god
But for Death which is all of these
(*Sufiana*, p. 49).

Contd….

- Celebration of love including same-sex love.
- Sense of alienation because of the social structure around him.
- Also tried to understand the psychology of women.
- Explored sex as a way to liberate oneself, and spiritual longing is there in his poetry.

"…I had already left my body behind
In an attempt to become angelic. "(*Alif/Alpha: Poems for Ashfaque*)

Conclusion

- Merchant celebrates spiritual love along with physical love, a journey from imagination to reality.
- Union with soul is more important for him.
- Use of myth by him gives extra sense of cultural touch to his poetry.
- Searches for an identity which has been marginalized in the dominant discourse of our society.

"The body dies
The soul lives
What then am I tied to?
Holding hands?" (*Johah and the Whale* 16)

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Summing up

“People forgot their own names
They remembered the Name
Which too they soon forgot:
why do you ask the Name?
They asked
And remembered only love.” (Merchant)

Thank You