

BOOK REVIEW**Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Unprivileged India (2006) by Maya Sharma****Sekh Shamim**

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Introduction

While talking about the notions of love, gender, identity, and sexuality in a heteronormative way we sometimes pretermit the existence and experience of the politically, culturally, and sexually underprivileged sections of our society. Being a part of such a multicultural atmosphere we still don't talk much about queer people or the LGBTQ+ community around us. But the book by Maya Sharma opens up the space for a discussion from a cultural, political, religious, and sexual point of view.

Maya Sharma herself is a queer person. From her own experiences, she took up the challenge of making the eccentric other a part of the chronicle. Which ultimately results in an anthology of ten rare beautiful real-life case studies of working-class Indian women from different social, cultural, and religious backgrounds. The study shows how some women with feelings of love for another woman somehow managed to live together in the early '90s irrespective of their family and society. Sharma and her colleagues sought to take the interviews with the women and make them understand or sometimes try to understand their desires as well as their condition. The text shows how they gradually open up to talk about the private spaces of their life.

Review

The whole idea of the survey came after the release of the Bollywood film *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta. It was the first Indian film to openly talk about lesbian relationships. On December 2, 1998, a group of 200 Shiv Sana Sainiks stormed a cinema theatre in the Suburban areas of Mumbai and after that, this protest went on in different places like Delhi, Kolkata, Kanpur, etc. On December 7, Mehta led a candlelit protest along with activists from 32 organizations including CALERI (Campaign for Lesbian Rights) shouting anti-Shiv Sena slogans. After the whole controversy the word 'lesbian' became very much familiar with the Indian scenario at least. Most of the women in the stories are not aware of the word 'lesbian' itself. Their relationship is marked by words like 'Saheli', 'Sakhi', etc. Sharma gives some statements collected from the CALERI report (1999) as evidence of the unqualified Homophobia of the Shiv Sena Cadre. Some of them are as follows:

'Why are such films made here? They can be made in the US or other Western countries. A theme like lesbianism does not fit in the Indian atmosphere.'

Former Union Minister for Home, L.K. Advani. (Sharma 13)

'There can be no argument that lesbianism is unnatural and is regarded as such the world over.'

Former Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Sushma Swaraj. (Sharma 13)

'Has lesbianism spread like an epidemic that it should be portrayed as a guideline to unhappy wives not to depend on their husbands?'

Former Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray. (Sharma 14)

'Do we have a lesbian culture in our families? Surely, this film has put all of us in a shameful light. Humko chullu bhar paani mein doob marna chahiye.'

Shiv Sena leader Madhukar Sarpotdar. (Sharma 14)

This book also talks about the conflict between various feminist groups who were not able to raise issues related to lesbian rights. One such group resisted the inclusion of the word 'lesbian' in their pamphlets on the ground that they would be distributed to working-class localities where people are still not ready to openly discuss homosexuality. This gesture clearly shows that there is no real sisterhood when it comes to the rights of women in general, women of lower class, Dalit working-class women in one, and the rights of lesbian women on the other. Regarding sisterhood between women, Vivek Shraya said, "But I'm especially afraid of women because my history has taught me that I can't fully rely upon other women for sisterhood, or allyship, or protection from men" (Shraya 46).

According to this logic, if a lesbian woman is poor by chance, it is only her poverty that will be highlighted and addressed, not her sexual orientation. She further talks about how lesbianism is not specified as a criminal act but since it is perceived as unnatural, it is illegal by analogy as well. We could take the remarks by the lesbian activist Ashwini Sukthankar, which says:

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code makes homosexual acts between men illegal but does not technically have lesbianism within its purview since the legal definition of intercourse requires penetration . . . the invisibility conferred to us by the law our special share of the country's colonial legacy does not necessarily result in lesbians being 'legal' and therefore having legal recourse to fighting discrimination and harassment. On the contrary, invisibility means that the fact of our existence is still more shocking when it is revealed, and the very law that seems to ignore the reality of lesbian existence is employed to crush it out. (Sukthankar 13, 14)

Sharma worked for Jagori, a Delhi-based organization for women since 1991. Their work starts with the search for single women with lesbianism as one of the categories to keep in mind. The first use of the word 'lesbian' was in a Women's Movement Conference held in Calicut in 1990 by a middle-class woman who identified herself as a lesbian. For the first time 'sexuality' was a separate workshop theme, with lesbianism as a sub-theme used in the Fifth Women's Movement Conference in Tirupati in 1994 (Sharma 24).

This book starts as a journey in 2001 with surveying, documentation, interviews, etc. It tries to present a set of various experiences yet unified at its core. The stories range from different age groups, like 15 to 40. Sharma offers multicultural perspectives by looking for stories within the innermost villages of our states including Gujrat, Rajasthan, Delhi, Ahmedabad, Odisha, etc. The book became very critical as it discusses the social and religious impacts on the subjects. Sharma encounters working-class single women or living together with other women from different social and religious backgrounds such as Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Dalit Upper class, working-class Dalits, etc. She interrogates the connotation and political significance of the word 'lesbian' and how a sexualized female friendship is different from a lesbian relationship. Why the word lesbian is considered dirty, filth, and dangerous while hailing a female friendship as safe and virtuous?

The first narrative revolves around the lives of Aasu (21) and Guddi (19), who lived next door since they were young. Guddi's family forced her into marriage against her will despite her protests. When she came back to her family, she was again called back by her in-laws, because they couldn't manage the household without her. Because of her prior encounters with a women's group, Guddi was hesitant to relate her story. All of them began to laugh because "For them, it was a joke, an opportunity to ridicule us, while for us it is a question of our lives, Guddi remarked furiously" (Sharma 47). The story is noteworthy since Guddi's mother decided for Guddi's sister to marry her husband in the end. Sharma makes clear how the family's impotence resulted from having to give one daughter instead of the other when something similar happened. However, Guddi was at least accompanied on her trek by her mother.

But the next anecdote that made a front story in the national Hindi daily Navbharat Times on September 8, 2001, was about two young women Rekha and Dolly, who ran away from their home and later got married to each other. However, the family denied the news and reported that it was the fear of the exam that made them do so. This narrative serves as an illustration of how ordinary individuals can become victims of circumstances beyond their control. Getting through this will have a psychological consequence that not everyone finds pleasant. This is demonstrated by Rekha's father, who was offended by the controversy and lost focus when riding a scooter behind a relative, causing him to be struck by a bus. Rekha has quit attending school and has been living with her uncle since then. The fact that Sharma was unable to speak with Dolly means that this story is somehow still unfinished. The financial issue from two distinct

situations and the social scandal were the only similarities between the first two instances. However, it also emphasises the nature of the relationship between two girls, or more accurately, two women: Rekha and Dolly or Guddi and Aasu. They were neighbours and had known one another since they were little in both situations. Being intimate with one another is something that happens a lot when kids are young. But at what point, after some controversy or outspoken approval, did society or family decide to keep them apart?

The tale of Payal and Meneka, two fifteen- and sixteen-year-old schoolgirls who fled to live together. When confronted, the families, like in some other cases, denied that the incident had happened. However, this tale provides opportunities to recognise patriarchal control and societal and familial paramountcy. Yash, the brother of Meneka remarks, “But for poor people, honor is the only wealth we have” (Sharma 89). Later he had a court marriage to a girl he liked against his parent’s wishes. While Yash’s act was forgiven and reconciled, Meneka’s was prohibited and punished as well. The Duality and sanctimony of the family and society could never adjust to the equality of women in general, how could they even think of offering an inch to the peculiar and outlandish? Some positives are there in the story as Meneka and Payal could never be together but both are determined to procure something in their life. Meneka expressed her desire to be an Air Force Pilot one day. Meneka in her last conversation with Sharma said that she never wanted to see Payal in her life as she is the reason for all this turmoil and her condition.

If a woman discerned her need to be a lesbian much later in her life what are the options she had? Well, to provide the answer we must look into the story of Manjula and Meeta, two middle-aged women living together in the slum area of Delhi. Manjula is married once and now she is living with her daughter Kajal along with her female friend Meeta. Sharma got to know about them from a woman named Shobha she met in a campaign for women. Shobha told her that Manjula and Meeta are known as 'Miya Bibi Jodi' in the locality. Regarding the relationship between Meeta and Manjula, Shobha once remarks,

This is a good thing between two women, I mean a relationship like that between husband and wife. Two women can support each other physically, emotionally, and financially. If there were more such relationships, men would not know what to do! In a relationship between women, one will not eat after the other has eaten, or get up early to do chores and go to sleep late finishing chores, or meekly obey the other without question, as it is in man-woman relationships . . . (Sharma 101).

In the entire story of Manjula, she never disclosed what Meeta is to her and says how a good normal female friendship with a girl was part of life more than anything theatrics. There was no communication between them and this proved the point of Sharma. It is a mature middle-aged lesbian relationship that must be genuinely platonic (with no physical favors). In one incident, the landlady said to her daughter who was going through a separation, “How many times have

you said this and how many times have you gone back on your word? Why do you need him? Look at Meeta and Manjula, they live on their own, they will help you, if need be, and you have me and the children” (Sharma 110). They have become a voice against the vehement brutality within the patriarchal institution called marriage. The story ends with a revelation after the dispute between them and when Meeta goes back to her village. Manjula said, “I want Meeta back, I want to live with her again” (Sharma 116). Her last statement shows her emotional ties with Meeta and is enough for us to understand the nature is their relationship.

Many women were skeptical about their relationship with other women. She is among those who share her journey unflinchingly, Sheila Sharma, which is how she landed on a girl and her Muslim family hunting for a groom. However, an intermediate action of running away from a marriage makes this complete incident slightly societal and communal. It truly became an issue for the village and community. They finalised it by blackening her face, putting a garland of shoes around her neck, and parades throughout the village. As she challenged the reverence of the entire village, she was locked up for two days, beaten and stripped to verify that she was indeed a woman. Her story is an example of their alien existence and also questions the role of society and community in politicizing the matter when it comes to the peril of their patriarchal hypocrisy as we have seen in the earlier story of Meneka and Payel. Irrespective of all these, Sheila never stops to be what she is. Her appearance is almost like a male which goes with her attitude. Her real name was Anuradha but at the age of 12, she changed her name and took the name Sheila as it sounds nice. Later her disclosure about her daily life reveals her profound religious faith in Goddess Kali. She shares her experiences of love with Manju, a woman she met and they become close. Manju once said, “It is the right thing to do. Women have to marry. My brother worries because of me. Besides, people talk if daughters of marriageable age are not married off. We will continue to be friends even after I am married. Rather, we will be allowed to remain friends if I marry” (Sharma 130).

This comment is a traditional way is thinking, but apart from Manju, all other people are very different in the story in comparison to the others in this anthology. For example, Lali expressed her feelings boldly as well by saying “I love Sheila with all my being. I gave her all of myself. But she has betrayed me” (Sharma 120). The story of Sheila and Lali contends with the notions of the orthodox thought process that to live with another woman, one has to marry or maintain a female friendship in the eyes of society, which is pretty evident in most of the previous stories in this anthology. One action in the story manifests Sheila's open challenge to the conformist notions of culture and society, when she puts the sindoor in the parting hair of Lali. Even the mother of Lali was open to their relationship. Another instance from the story that makes it distinct from the others is the support and the frank attitude of the mothers who themselves are women. The Story of Sheila Sharma is an inspiration for thousands of women out there who are unable to come out from the dangers of societal humiliation and could live a normal life with their real identities.

When India was making headlines for Communal riots continuously, Razia and Sabo managed to find a place in the small village of Balaghat (UP) in the early 90s. Their story accentuates the peaceful bond between Hindu-Muslims in rural parts of the state while cities like Kanpur, Meerut, Saharanpur, and Varanasi were burning with communal hate. Razia said how they were never judged by the people of the locality and everyone was always welcome despite living in the Hindu locality and being a Muslim. Razia's story falls under the impression of feminism as she was a rebel from her childhood along with her sisters. Three girls were enough for the whole village, panchayat, and the Thakur whom they had threatened to strip if he refused to give their land back. This attitude, without any male support and family backup, envisions her road toward equal rights for women be it socially, culturally, or individually. She was also married like other women but once Sabo said, "Sleeping with men was not enjoyable at all. Nothing like what we enjoyed with each other. But we endured sex with our husbands somehow, and somehow our children were born" (Sharma 145).

This particular comment may be implied upon exactly how many women we don't know actually. It is only through this kind of narrative we get to know their inner feelings. What struck me in this story is the aesthetics of the thought and kudos to the author, who never hesitates to present the reality. After Sabo's marriage, all three of them live together with the consent of the husband. The first child of Razia was brought up single-handedly by Sabo for ten years. Now Sabo expressed her feelings that "I had a dream that our children would marry one another, our families would stay connected, we could continue our relationship" (Sharma 144). The intensity of the thought reminds me of any hetero-normative love story of any decade. Sabo also had a difficult life fighting with society after her marriage then moved to the city and had to undergo some psychiatric treatment alone without any family support. Their story ends with Sabo expressing another of her prospects to be supportive of her daughter if she chooses to be with a woman in her life. Sabo and Razia both are the epitome of women empowerment in general if we look into their struggles individually and also brought a strong yet aesthetic voice to the whole queer community.

Indian society always rated the legitimacy of heterosexual marriages, marriages that are decided by the family. If you are bearing with the abuses within the institute of marriage, you will be held as a goddess and, if not, then as madness. To be a part of this legitimization, women of anomalous identity try all means but validation is far from sight. Mary, a Christian Adivasi girl who married the boy of her own choice, had to undergo innumerable abuses for twenty years till she decides to take a stand for herself. She lives by her earnings and brings her daughter up. When she finds a friend her life comes alive. Society held her as a prostitute. Her friend suggested she be the co-wife of her husband to which the husband also agrees. However, Mary didn't agree and later joined some women's organizations. Even the women's group is not supportive sometimes towards their members. Once Mary said, "There is no bitterness. And the memory of our love is as precious as gold. We were friends, yes, that is the difference, not master and slave" (Sharma 154). What Mary has gone through made her realize that heterosexual relationships are a form of colonial practice. The situation in the story and some previous ones goes on par with the lines of Simone De Beauvoir, who said, "Any institution which solders one

person to another, obliging people to sleep together who no longer want to is a bad one" (Beauvoir 329).

Juhi's story takes us to the point when Dalits were fighting for their rights. While the Dalits are facing oppression everywhere, masculinity finds its root in domestic violence and like always the prey is the women. Juhi was a Christian girl and later married to a Dalit man and had to change her religion to Hinduism. Her story is not only about a lesbian woman and her lesbian daughters but is packed with the issue of caste and class oppression along with religiosity. All three of her daughters are lesbian and she is quite happy with this. Her story is also about her transformation. She read an essay by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay called "The Value of a Woman" and she claimed that it changed her life fully. She talks about her first lover, Lucy, and later Shahsi as well. One thing very clear from almost all the stories is that most of the women who love another woman are being betrayed somehow and that gives them the status of heterosexual love with Jealousy, possessiveness, sacrifice, etc. She ends her story by saying that why she supports her daughter is that they can choose freely which she could never done in her life. Her story qualifies as a beautiful story of a mother-daughter relationship without much politicization. Juhi and her daughter bring a fresh outlook and ray of hope for many girls who are afraid of coming out in a society where their identity could be torn apart within seconds.

Not every woman who is a lesbian wants to give her daughter the same freedom she was denied. Sometimes religion holds the plate we serve. This is the scenario in the story of Hasina and Fatima, two middle-aged married women living with their son and daughter. Hasina wants to marry off her daughter Sahira, and she explains "On the Day of Judgement I will have to give an account of all the things that I had to do and did not do" (Sharma 175). Hasina could read Urdu but didn't follow the typical rules of that time as she didn't wear a burqa like her sisters. She follows her religion and she is worried about her afterlife and how she will face the Almighty if she doesn't settle her daughters. So, we can see a pretty difference in the views of both Hasina and Juhi and the other women from the previous story. She was willing not to make her daughters marry off without their wishes, and here we have Hasina who has to as she proclaimed her religion. Fatima is a different sort of a woman. She is very muscular and powerful as well. She killed a snake on the spot by picking it up like anything. One thing that is special about the story is how Fatima and Choti endeavor to be a part of the male world. They are the only two women among all male hawkers outside the Kachehri. They are not beggars. Their story is also different from other working-class lesbian women who work from home or in a factory with other women. Hasina like other women in the anthology also can't explain the relationship. But one thing is common in almost five stories out of ten where the family of one woman is closely associated with others. They share an emotional bond apart from living together. They have been together for Eight years without a single fight whether her husband used to beat her almost every day. She asks "Why should I not live with someone who supports me in all ways" (Sharma 180).

Is it only our bodies that make the difference? In the end, we are all human beings, right? This question will come to our mind when we have to deal with a text like this and such narrations of discrimination. A similar thought was expressed by Vimlesh, another woman from Ajmer, Rajasthan, who dresses up like a boy in her daily life. The story is piled with cultural and religious tensions. Vimlesh is the product of the contemporary society. She is happy only with

the acceptance within the family and the factory she works for. She wants to continue her life like this, but Sharma came to know about a girl, Kanak. While asking Kanak she was very bold in her words and said without hesitation, “A love affair. I love her” (Sharma 32). If we look at the story, it will appear that Guddi, Hasina, Sheila, Juhi, etc, all of them make a distinct mark by embracing their nonbinary identities sooner or later in their life. While Vimlesh stands alone in the world of others somehow.

Conclusion

This anthology brought so many thoughts and questions regarding the socio-cultural norms of religion and caste. It tries to capture India, the unknown, unspeakable India with its beautiful and blunt narrative. Most of the women in the anthology, while referring to women's groups, said that they never heard about any such groups previously. This indicates the rural parts of the country being devoid of such terms. It also opens the path for many authors, scholars in the field to explore the distinction between queer life and the attitude of the urban and rural parts of our country. By bringing out the relationships between women that go beyond physical relations and also by presenting the complex human geography of two people who sought to live together and somehow find ways to love, this anthology challenges the Homophobic readings of desire between women. The text also brings to light the complicated relationship between women in general and lesbian women. It captures the reasons and factors responsible for the miserable and nonexistent life of Queer people around us. This book is a great example of understanding that social patriarchal hierarchy is not the only reason but a lot of other reasons are there. As readers, the greatest tribute we can give to this book is to use the text to embark on our life's journey and take a moment to appreciate and cherish the world around us and realize that everything is not quite as it appears.

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