

The Influence of America in the Contemporary Sexual Culture of India

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The Stonewall Riots of New York and its following reaction through protest and Pride March revolutionized the sexual culture all over the world. Without an exception, India has been influenced by its strategic planning, cultural protest, the act of self-affirmation, pride march and all. In fact, the young generations of India especially from urban areas are no longer ashamed to talk about sexuality; they rather enthusiastically participate in Pride March wearing colourful dresses, hoisting rainbow flags, holding banners, roaring slogans and their determinism plays a strong part in the new formation of sexual culture. The colonial history and the popularity of English as an official language motivate the Indians for decades to follow western books, music, films, literature, culture and almost everything that can cheer them up. Technological advancement, internet, cable and satellite ease geographical distance, cultural gap and also the obsessive ideas of sexuality. In fact the urban young generations are growing up with English and American music, the contemporaries like Adam Lambert, Lance Bass, Jonathan Knight, Ty Herndon, Billy Gilman, Mika, Jake shears, Frank Ocean, Billy Porter, Ferras Alqaisi, Michael Stipe, Trey Pearson, Steve grand, and the timeless singers Freddie Mercury, David Bowie, Elton john, George Michael are all self-declared gay men and the young Indians admire them greatly. Books like *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin, *The City and the Pillar* by Gore Vidal, *Dancer from the Dance* by Andrew Holleran, *Leaves of grass* by Walt Whitman, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf are now internationally acclaimed and the students of English literature ardently read them. Moreover, the support from American Gender/sex theorists like Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz help us think critically and philosophically. In the field of research, the marginal spaces of alternative sexual people have been recognized through American ghettos which further reinforce to locate similar marginal spaces all over India. For instance the hijras of India live in group and in particular place. For the hijras "being independent of the group means not freedom, but social suicide." Nanda 48). The dwelling places of hijras are similar to American ghettos but they were not visited or addressed until ghettos came into our knowledge. The ghettos which were once situated at the working-class part of the city or economically undeveloped area later transformed into expensive and high-quality gay neighbourhood but the residents of hijras have found no greater improvement. Indeed, the autobiography, *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* written by an Indian hijra, A Revathi informs how unhealthy and unhygienic places the hijras live in. However, the study of sexuality in India is complicated because people of different class, caste, religion live together and the diverse economic classes ranging from extreme poor to extreme rich cannot perceive the notion of sexuality uniformly. In this context, I can say that the social system of America is apparently democratic in terms of thoughts and visions which enable all their LGBT people irrespective of classes to participate spontaneously in the Pride March. Therefore, the cities of United States like New York, Washington, Chicago, and Los Angeles could arrange spectacular rallies every year with highest number of LGBT people. In Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata and many other big cities of India; Pride Marches take place every year very much like United States but the participants are highly fashionable, educated,

smart, urban living and adopted with western identities and they hardly have care for the indigenous alternative sexual people who remain “unprogressive”, unrecognized and even invisible. The urban alternative sexual people could easily accept the Americanized values and ideas whereas the poor and proletariats could not follow and indeed, many of them undergo identity crisis in an apparently sexually repressive country. But, the repressive culture of India could not affect much upon the urban LGBT people who have fitted themselves with a broad cosmopolitan culture and in no ways they can be identified as subaltern sexual dissidents. The urban homosexuals conveniently adopt western identities which allow them to stay with families and not to stay separately like the hijras. Hijras also creates an artificial family structure among them and it is merely a replication of heterosexual family but they remain socially alienated and marginalized. Homosexuality has been recognized as a globally characterized culture and to explain the globalism of gay identity Dennis Atman cites from the *Economist* “In effect what McDonald’s has done for food or Disney has done for entertainment, the global emergence of ordinary gayness is doing for sexual cultures” (Jackson 358). It comes to mean similar to McDonald and Disney, the mechanism of queering the society has its first outset in United States and then it passes on to other parts of the world. In India urban elite or educated middle class could afford the privilege of global queering but most of the others remain deprived. However, the researches face the difficulty to explain the whole scenario because they have grown up in apparently urban sphere which is not enough for them to capture the identities and existences of rural, subaltern alternative sexual people. Ruth Vanita in her book *Same Sex Love and Eroticism in India* expresses “To get the bugbear of ‘westernization’ out of the way – both of us [Vanita and Kidwai] were raised and educated in urban India and definitely have been influenced by western thought, as any reader of this book and any educated Indian, including the non-English speaking necessarily is. It is debatable whether even rural literate Indians today are entirely untouched by the ‘west’, and whether to be so untouched is desirable. Neither ‘Western’ nor ‘Eastern’ influence is pure or unmixed and neither has fixed value; more important is what one selects and what one aims to accomplish” (Vanita & Kidwai xxxiv). But the irony is – despite the message of borderlessness from the authors Vanita and Kidwai, none of the publishers from India agreed to publish their book, the book had to be published first in America. However, the later publications of the book from India sold rapidly and it shows the vibrant curiosity of Indians about homosexuality. But the readers of the book are obviously urban living people and the book since have been written in English, no attention is paid by less educated and backward people. America has definitely influenced to create a positive environ for Indian sexual dissidents but it’s our problem in implementation of policies which fail to unite people irrespective of class, caste, religion. After independence, India establishes a federal parliamentary democratic republic state but its long tradition of producing dichotomies, binaries and divisions in terms of gender, race, class, caste, religion, language, economy, and politics seem to be the biggest cultural drawback to achieve desirable democracy. Despite that, the critics and researchers often blame America for penetrating occidental sexual culture into ours but we should keep in my mind that our cultural history regarding sexuality has always been silent, repressive and it is the gay liberation movement of West, primarily America induced a change of policy. In India, before 80s people were hardly aware of alternative sexuality and the very few books and materials upon which we claim our queer history were not as popular as they have become now. However, Silviano Santiago

expresses the failure of LGBT movement in Brazil and the strategy of “coming out”, adopted from North America pushes up only “a “wily” form of exhibitionism that is centered on the body, on conduct, on the “ambiguity of behaviour,” rather than on the expression of marginal identity.” (Cruz-Malave and Manalansan 9). Silvano Santiago’s view regarding Pride March is justifiable as I have already said that the urban, city-based rallies could not address the marginal, subaltern sexual identities. Even so, we cannot deny the relevance of Pride March because it gives the message to take pride in identity. It can be related to the theoretical terminology “closet” which is a sign of oppression and we cannot ignore it as “it indicates at once the restraints on queer self-expression, the terror and claustrophobia inherent in these restraints as well as to the simultaneous mystification, revulsion, fear and curiosity of the onlooker outside the closet in response to the quasi-mythical, part-demonic “other” inside it (a replication of the childhood fantasy of the unseen “monster in the closet”)” (Mallick Choudhuri 25). Metaphorically, closet is a space of “hiding”, “invisibility” and “darkness” and the act of “coming out” determines visibility, release and liberty. These theoretical terms, primarily introduced by American academicians help us relate with the contexts of India. Indian researchers who presently are working on alternative sexualities try to maintain stability throughout their work because they don’t want to be blamed as being lost into global perspective nor into local specifications. Since, I have tried to locate the cultural junctions between India and America, I might be considered as one of them but I practically started with no such target. I just shared my observation about American influences in contemporary sexual culture of India.

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