

A Comparative Analysis of Same-Sex Relationships and Traditional Families in Ruth Vanita's Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West

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Abstract

The representation of same-sex desire in literature has tried to give an identity to the homosexuals which they always long for. There are many texts which portray the problems faced by homosexuals in the contemporary times as well as in past. The present paper aims to highlight the problems that homosexuals face and tries to analyse how the concept of marriage, traditional families and modern families is evolving with time which helps same-sex relationships flourish within the family without any social stigma. Identity, which has always been a debatable topic w.r.t homosexuals, has been discussed by examining Ruth Vanita's point of view. Ruth Vanita's book Love's Rite: Same Sex Marriage in India and the West has extensively written about how in the traditional as well as modern families the relationship between same-sex people exists.

Key words: *Same-sex relationships; Traditional Families; Dual Identity; Social and psychological stigma; Acceptance; Marginalised.*

I. Introduction

Homosexuality is a very debateable topic these days. Many writers have tried to portray the issues related to the lives of homosexuals through Literature. Writers such as Manju Kapoor, Ismat Chughtai, Raj Rao and many more have tried to bring the issues and problems faced by homosexuals in the contemporary times. Even after the decriminalization of section 377, homosexuals are still at the periphery where social acceptance remains as an unanswered question in their lives. Society is still not accepting them, and their struggle continues. The above-mentioned fact remains unchangeable but there is one more side of the lives of homosexuals which remains in the dark. Homosexuals face problems of identity, which is a fact, but in order to hide their identity and sexual preference to full fill their desire they often opt for heterosexual marriage. This is only one way for them through which they can secretly maintain their relationship with their same-sex counterpart. In some countries where

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Homosexuality is not a taboo, but socially accepted norm, homosexuals have come out openly and have announced their relationship without fear of any violence.

Homosexuality has been defined as sexual interest in and attraction to members of one's own sex by Encyclopedia Britannica; and as sexual or romantic attraction to others of one's same sex by Merriam-Webster. Nevertheless, the issue is not as simple as the definition, rather it is a very complex one. The term 'homosexuality' was coined in the late 19th century by an Austrian-born Hungarian psychologist, Karoly Maria Benkert (Pickett, 2020). The term is very new but the concept is as old as human feelings. There is mention of sexuality in general, and same-sex attraction in particular. But the same-sex relationships and marriages have always been looked down upon by the society and the members of Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) community have always been despised. Recently, in many countries, including India, the courts of law have upheld the validity of these relationships, and the behaviour and attitude of people too have evolved over time, but still there is a long way to go to give 100 percent acceptance to same-sex unions and marriages. These unions, as opposed to the union of people of different sex, is still considered unnatural and offensive. The families of the members of LGBT community, all around the world, consider the people in same-sex relationships a shame. The same-sex marriages and relationships raise very complex questions about the concept of traditional notions of sexuality and family. The religious and social norms have always shown contempt of same-sex marriages. Religion and society are deeply engraved into marriages and since both religion and society consider same-sex marriages as against the established norms, these marriages are always despised of. There have been variety of responses to same-sex marriages in different laws, the first response was intolerance wherein these marriages were completely criminalised. Homosexuality had been an offence for over many decades in the world as well as in India. Then about two decades ago, the response started to ease out. Many people started taking on to the streets to demand equality for the alternative sexuality. Efforts were made to decriminalise these relationships between people of same-sex. Finally, the states yielded to the demand and same-sex relationships and marriages were given validity and acceptance in the society. In the United Kingdom, these marriages were declared legal in the year 2013 and these couples were given right to marry; the United States of America followed the trend and decriminalised same-sex relationships and marriages in 2015. Following the same trend, the Supreme Court of India too repealed the article 377, which penalised same-sex relationships, in the year 2018.

Post state's acceptance of this union, there have been mixed reactions from the people. There are many people who support the verdict on both social and religious grounds, and then there is another section which still doesn't approve of this kind of marriage. The LGBT community may have received validation by state but still it has not been accepted completely by the society. The recent ruling of the Supreme Court of India has decriminalised homosexuality but the alternate sexuality is still not openly accepted by many sections of the society especially the religious groups haven't yet accepted this alternative sexuality and still consider same-sex relationships a sin.

II. Depiction of Homosexuality in Vanita's Love's Rite

Ruth Vanita in her book *Love's Rite* talks about the same-sex relationships and how the idea of traditional families and traditional marriages are helping them to full fill their desire of living with their loved partners. She

has discussed how the secret of living in the traditional marriage is a blessing to homosexuals through which they do not have the fear of social rejection and can be part of the Traditional Family. She has analysed cases from West as well as India where large number of homosexuals are living in the traditional marriages. She says, "Governmental refusal to validate same-sex marriage does not put an end to same-sex relationships or strengthen the traditional family. On the contrary, by refusing equal rights to gay people, governmental discrimination will continue to function as an incentive for gay and bisexual people to enter heterosexual marriages and lead double lives, in accordance with well-established tradition. (Vanita, 2005, p. 219)

Therefore, it is really an important issue to consider that homosexuals are facing dilemma in their lives which sometimes leads to serious consequences. They are living with the double life and double identity which is a worldwide phenomenon, this is not something that is alien to India or other countries where homosexual men get married to a woman. Ruth Vanita further says, "In the US, African-American men who have sex with men but see themselves as heterosexual have coined the phrase 'on the down low' or 'DL', to describe their sexual arrangements." (220).

Ruth Vanita has also described about how 'Traditional' family in West and in India treat the concept of marriage. In her book *Love's Rite: Same Sex Marriage in India and the West* she says that the tradition of marriage is same in West as well as in India, where a gay man marries a woman not out of love but a compulsion and constitute a 'traditional' family. She further says that arranged marriages are still predominant and are very much part of the Asian, Africans and rural Southern Europe. She also talks about the normative marriage and draws various Biblical references to support that same-sex relationship exists in traditional family also by the mode of kinship. She talks about two institutions of marriage where she says, "as an example of kinship, I examine the institution of co-wifery. Despite the horror some right wing Christians in the West expresses towards polygamy and co-wifery, these are Biblically sanctioned institutions, which, whether we like it or not, constitute a highly 'traditional' type of marriage in many societies, including some minority communities in the West and in India" (223). Though she has talked about the institution of marriage with reference to kinship, but she is in favour of another institution of marriage which is both traditional as well as modern. According to her a non-sexual marriage is a type of marriage which is most popular amongst the Indian gay and lesbians where they are arranging marriage for themselves. Though every aspect of marriage is heterosexual but there is no sexual affection and it is non-sexual. She says, "this type of marriage is the product of modern sexual identity construction, and aided by international networks and the internet, However, it grows directly out of modern monogamous marriage based on individual choice" (223)

She further compares that the idea of traditional marriage in West and in India. According to her even till date in West no one revokes the idea of marriage as a social arrangement where couple enter into marriage to please parents and society. She talks about Europe and America where in early twentieth century this practise was killed, and it is no more just pleasing the parents as well as society.

Monitoring the cases in India the concept of marriage is still traditional and marriage is referred to as a social duty. she says, "this makes it possible for many gay Indians, even Indians living in the West, to openly search for gay partners of the opposite sex. Such arrangements used to be made in South Asian gay media and websites. While some gay Indians condemn such arrangements as hypocritical, others consider them dutiful rather than cynical" (224)

She has coined the term MOC which means 'Marriage of Convenience' and says that now openly gay men and lesbians are frequently posting on various web sites where they openly disclose their identity and their preference to marry the opposite sex person. This way they can maintain their social status of being married with the opposite sex but in private with the consent of their spouse they can fulfil their desire of love with the same-sex counterpart. She says. "The term marriage of convenience' used to refer to heterosexuals who decide to get married for financial, social and practical rather than romantic reason" (224). People from all religions across world are opting this mode of marriage to fulfil their desires. With the increase interest in MOC same-sex couple tries to overcome the pressure of marriage which is acceptable in the society. The pressure of marriage in the lives of homosexuals is emotional rather than physical. When they post the advertisements regarding MOC they can openly ask for the preference of their choice where there is no bar of caste, creed and religion. It can be analysed that same-sex people are in favour of such type of advertisements because they think that if they enter the heterosexual marriage or the traditional marriage they can be part of the society which is accepting them on one hand and at the same time they do not have the guilt that they are spoiling the life of their counterpart (opposite sex) because everything happened with the consent. Even one can see the kind of advertisements same-sex people chose where it is clearly visible that they are entering MOC only because of parental pressure for marriage with heterosexual. Ruth Vanita has analysed the case of a 21 year -old woman who was in long term relationship with a woman and describes that the pressure to enter the heterosexual marriage was more emotional rather than economical or physical. By stating an example of a woman who left her parents because of emotional pressure but at the same time was searching for gay male so that she can live comfortably in society. Ruth quotes from an advertisement which reflects the fear of same-sex people living with and tries to find a solution to overcome the emotional pressure from the parents.

The social expectations from the heterosexual marriage is, "I am a 28 closet Indian male looking for a bi/lesbian to spend my life with. I was born and raised in the United States. For society, family, and personal reasons I would like to build a marriage of convenience" (226) another advertisement points out, "I refuse to marry someone without them knowing anything about my situation. I don't want to hurt or destroy someone else's life" (226). Thus one can see that if homosexuals enter the MOCs it will help both gay and lesbians to overcome the problems they face due to societal pressure and also to overcome the adversaries they face in heterosexual marriage.

Ruth Vanita also opines that MOCs are not only based on romantic love, but it only takes place to overcome the societal pressure homosexuals face and live with in their lives. She also distinguishes between the heterosexual marriages of homosexuals and develops an argument that homosexual marriages are not at all sexual in some cases and if it is sexual it serves only the purpose of procreation. "to take a less extreme view, in many traditional marriages, even as late the nineteenth century in Europe and the US, husband and wife slept apart in separate beds or even separate bedrooms, especially after they produced requisite number of children" (230). Despite fulfilment of basic needs of life to live in traditional family there might be needed to fulfil the romantic and emotional relationship outside marriage. Thus, one can conclude that the relationship which exists between husband and wife may be only to fulfil the social obligation and not the emotional and romantic love that one desire for. Examining the cases from India Ruth says that gay men in India thinks that till the time they are fulfilling the needs of their counterpart and they don't know about their husband's relationship with another gay man would never hurt them. She has not only jagged to the desire of gay man to be in relationship but she on the

other hand side also talks about woman who prefer to live with another woman. She points out that men more openly talk about their sexual preference, but women always don't talk about their preference or their desire to be with the other woman whom she loves. It is neglected or are at the periphery. Ruth also talks about that the reason behind neglecting of female- female sexual relationships is because of patriarchy which is deep rooted in the Indian society. She has quoted an example from the family where mother-in law fell in love with her daughter -in-law that clearly shows how the desire of a woman is neglected and ignored.

III. Conclusion

Ruth has focused on the relationship which exists between co-wives. In such relationships they are not afraid of any social stigma and can happily live with each other in one family. Women usually spend much time together in a family rather than the man which is yet another way through which the concept of co-wives become important to consider. She also states that the love or relationship which exists between co-wives is misrepresented and is stereotyped whose textual representation is either more complex or ideal. The book demonstrates the concept of co-wives with reference to the ancient narratives of *Mahabharata* and *Swapnavasavadattam*. These narratives clearly state that the relationship and love between co-wives existed.

Another argument which she has tried to put forward regarding the concept of "Down Low" states that there have been debates in India as well as West regarding the homosexual relationships. In India where homosexuals should not demand for the rights or construct their distinct sexual identity because they are not predominantly attacked. Activists in India and in West feel that homosexuals should keep maintaining their secret relationships in the society as they have been doing it for a quite long time. They can have extra marital affair with same-sex partner because it is not considered offence in terms of law. Ruth Vanita has clearly stated in her book that she is not supporting the idea of relationships which flourish in the traditional families, but same-sex relationship exists in the traditional families because many gay Indians have to compulsorily choose the heterosexual marriage so that they can be free from the stigma of being 'unnatural'. This stigma is not only related to the societal aspect but also to the psychological aspect of not labelling them as 'unnatural'. She states, "when the social superior is single and the subordinate married, heterosexual privilege may trump class privilege and result in a transaction that is mutually useful but that downgrades the gay person" (244). Thus, the present research paper aims to point the ideas of traditional families where the same-sex relationships flourish, and homosexuals maintain their relationship with their same-sex partner either telling their spouse or hiding their true identity from their spouse. Entering the institution of marriage through Heterosexual marriage is the only prerogative for the homosexuals to fulfil their desire. Traditional as well as Modern families both still abide by the societal norms where homosexuality and same- sex desire is stigmatized and is looked down upon. Though the society has accepted that there exist such desires but still there are many hurdles which homosexuals have to face to live their life securely and with their choice. They are still torn between accepted and non-accepted norms of the stereotyped notions which is prevalent in the contemporary times and searching for the alternatives with the family as well as society to full fill their desire of love and a life which is free from any kind of violence. It is a fact that are always in search for an alternative or mid-way through which they can both maintain their dual identity and live a life according to the norms of the society.

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