

Analysing the Queer Self in Hoshang Merchant's *The Man Who Would Be Queen*

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Abstract

In a postcolonial environment that frequently marginalizes queer identities, Hoshang Merchant's *The Man Who Would Be Queen* is not only an autobiographical narrative but also a bold act of self-articulation. This paper explores how Merchant's story subverts heteronormative frameworks and colonial conceptions of gender and sexuality, examining the relationship between postcolonialism and queer selfhood. This study examines the connections between sexuality, gender performance, and social hierarchy in Merchant's life and literature using a multidisciplinary approach that includes queer theory (Judith Butler), psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud), and identity politics (Michel Foucault).

Keywords: surveillance and power, gender performativity, subaltern voice, confessional writing.

Introduction

In India, patriarchal systems, rigid societal norms, and colonial laws have traditionally repressed queer identities. Notwithstanding its cultural diversity, postcolonial India has long been hostile to non-conforming sexual identities. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which has since been repealed, was one of the British colonial statutes that criminalized LGBT existence and reinforced the strict gender and sexuality binary. A rebellious voice against these systematic erasures can be heard in Hoshang Merchant's *The Man Who Would Be Queen*, written in 2011. Through the lenses of subalternity and surveillance, it analyses Hoshang Merchant's *The Man Who Would Be Queen*, emphasizing how queer identities deal with marginalization and societal control. The study examines Merchant's lived

experiences, emphasizing his opposition to patriarchal and heteronormative norms, using Michel Foucault's surveillance theory and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern notion. His story is an important work in the study of alternative sexual identities since it expresses a queer voice within Indian literary traditions, challenging hegemonic discourses. This analysis places Merchant's work within the greater context of transgressive autobiographies in Indian literature and adds to larger conversations on queer subalternity, identity construction, and literary resistance. One of the earliest works of Indian queer fiction is the autobiography *The Man Who Would Be Queen* by Hoshang Merchant. He offers a counter-narrative to prevailing heteronormative discourses through his confessional writing, which combines artistic resistance, intellectual rebellion, and personal suffering. It provides a personal narrative of his experiences negotiating these limitations as a queer Parsi man. In addition to being a personal account, the memoir offers a sociopolitical analysis of the ways in which Indian society controls sexuality. By fusing autobiography with queer theory, the text presents a distinctive viewpoint, making it a crucial topic for scholarly research. This paper explores how Merchant's identity is influenced by familial surveillance and the fight for self-expression by analysing his autobiography through the prism of postcolonial queer theory. The study comprises Foucault's concepts of surveillance and power, Butler's theory of gender performativity, and Spivak's discourse on the subaltern to assert that Merchant's life narrative functions as a counter-hegemonic text against colonial and patriarchal oppression. Merchant examines the subaltern experience of queer living and challenges the heteronormative norms that stifle originality through fragmented narratives and poetic reflections. With a conservative society as its backdrop, the text vividly describes his battle to balance his LGBT identity with social expectations.

Queer Self: The Story of Hoshang Merchant's Early Life

In LGBTQ+ studies, the queer self is a crucial idea that examines identity outside of binary and heteronormative frameworks. It describes how queer people create, negotiate, and claim their identities in social, cultural, and political contexts that frequently marginalize them. Hoshang Merchant's homosexual identity in *The Man Who Would Be Queen* is influenced by a number of factors, including his own emotional and intellectual awakenings, social expectations, and familial monitoring. His identity is an act of defiance against the prevailing patriarchal systems that aim to control gender expression and sexuality. In a heteronormative culture, Merchant reclaims his identity as an intellectual, poet, and openly homosexual man by embracing his queerness in spite of social oppression.

In this text, Hoshang Merchant describes his upbringing in an affluent but extremely dysfunctional Mumbai family. The rift in the family was caused by his father's infidelity, the parents' divorce, and his sister's suicide attempt. He became much more estranged after coming out as gay; his father sought psychological counselling, his sisters continued to be unsupportive, and his mother refused to acknowledge him. He even attempted suicide but was saved by his family in time.

Merchant's *The Man Who Would Be Queen* is a series of lyrical essays that tell his life story and illustrate the difficulties faced by a gay person in a heteronormative society. The book explores self-discovery, cultural expectations, and gender fluidity. Merchant talks openly about his sexual encounters and the need for confidentiality because of social condemnation. The autobiography is organized around three metaphorical spaces: the Garden of Delight (early childhood), the Circle of Hell (adolescence and hardships), and the Garden of Bliss (his literary journey). In a poetic narrative, Merchant describes his adventures and travels from 1976 to 1982, beginning in India and continuing to the West (Germany and the United States), the Middle East (Jerusalem, Palestine, and Tehran), and finally back to India. The book, written in an almost free-flowing style, chronicles major incidents in Merchant's life from childhood to his current position as a professor. He draws attention to how memory may be misleading, recognizing that personal recollections sometimes contain fictional components. His constant experiences with discrimination and betrayal, while finding comfort in art and travel, highlight the ongoing alienation he experiences as a gay man. At home, alliances were formed by gender conventions; his mother coped with emotional pain alone, while his grandfather stood behind his father, bolstering patriarchal control. Police intervention was frequently required to resolve family disputes, highlighting the breakdown in a home where authority and control were associated with masculinity. While his mother tried to keep the family together, his severe, emotionally detached, and forceful father promoted traditional masculinity and social privilege.

The pain, suppression, and self-discovery that characterized Merchant's early years prepared him for his subsequent battles with identity and belonging in a culture that does not accept nonconformity. After completing his studies in the United States and Germany, Merchant travelled extensively throughout West Asia for both business and pleasure. As he negotiates cultural differences, individual independence, and familial disputes, his experiences alternate between self-awareness, critique, and nostalgia. He

discusses his string of lovers and sexual experiences, as well as a number of family conflicts. His travel adventures, which began when he was still a student, led to many episodes because of his sexual orientation. There were also a few eventful incidents that helped him grow as a writer and poet. His romantic and sexual experiences, especially with his roommate Michael, help Merchant get a better understanding of gay life. He encounters the harsh reality of short-lived relationships as well as emotional connection. He is exposed to a thrilling but foreign world when Michael takes him to homosexual bars in Hollywood. Encounters with people like Scottie show that pleasure is a transaction, and Merchant himself becomes a prostitute, realizing that gay life at the time was impersonal and cyclical.

In his interactions with homosexual and bisexual men, Merchant describes how he was the one who was primarily betrayed and injured because none of them had the courage to come out and instead lived their lives in denial of their sexual orientation. He discusses every sexual experience he has had, some of which have involved love and affection and others that have not. The majority of his relationships did not last, although a few did, lasting only a few months or years. He is physically and emotionally traumatized by a race car driver named Joe's ruthless assault, which worsens his sense of loneliness.

Despite his trauma, he continues to be involved in the Gay Liberation movement, attending rallies, lectures, and self-expression events. A married professor who had just come out as gay made him meet his wife to learn more about what it is like to be homosexual, even highlighting the changing but still contradictory views of the time about queer identity. Additionally, he briefly discusses his love affair with Nablus, a fellow student, which likewise ended poorly. *The Man Who Would Be Queen* by Hoshang Merchant examines how performativity, subalternity, and surveillance shape queer identity. According to Foucault, surveillance is demonstrated by the way that Merchant's queerness was continuously observed and adjusted by society and family. According to Spivak's theory of subalternity, his voice was marginalized as a queer man in India, but he uses literature to recover his identity. According to Butler's theory, performativity is essential to his self-expression since he actively acts out and declares his queerness in opposition to strict gender standards.

Performing the "Queen Self"

The Man Who Would Be Queen is more than just an autobiography; it's a declaration of revolt, visibility, and pride. Merchant uses the term "queen" to show strength, grace, and defiance rather than as a disparaging phrase. He challenges the conventional male identity by rejecting hyper-masculine conventions and expressing a passion for literature, art, and emotion. Merchant shows that identity is dynamic and is performed, negotiated, and rewritten over time by publicly embracing his queerness. According to Butler's claim:

"There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results." (Butler's *Gender Trouble*, p. 25)

Therefore, Merchant's life story is a performance of queerness, where identity is continuously rewritten, rather than merely an autobiography. Merchant's personal experience is reflected in the title, but it also connects to the greater LGBTQ+ challenges in India and beyond. Merchant rejects the conventional dichotomy of "man" or "woman." He asserts a flexible, regal identity that is unconstrained by labels instead.

A queen is seen as a symbol of grace, authority, and power in many different cultures. Merchant employs this phrase to demonstrate his control over his own identity as well as to allude to his effeminacy. He reframes queerness as something magnificent, majestic, and royal by referring to himself as a "queen." According to the title, being queer is about embracing one's identity with dignity and confidence rather than being weak or ashamed. Merchant consciously chooses to be a queen, asserting his position in the world, in contrast to the submissive, concealed, or ostracized role that society expects of queer people. Merchant carries the title as a badge of honour rather than allowing it to degrade him. His self-description as a "queen" represents defiance of cultural expectations that men should repress feminine characteristics. By using the word "queen" in the title, Merchant bravely reclaims queerness and turns an insult into a sign of strength, rebellion, and self-creation. His lifelong battle against social norms, his quest for visibility, and his declaration of the LGBT self's sovereignty are all encapsulated in the title.

Queer Identity Under Surveillance: The Foucauldian Gaze

According to Michel Foucault, surveillance refers to the systems of power that keep an eye on, control, and punish people in order to get them to follow social norms. Hoshang Merchant's life in *The Man Who Would Be Queen* is influenced by ongoing scrutiny from his family, schools, and society at large, which forces him to internalize control over his own conduct, especially regarding his homosexual identity. Merchant

was constantly watched and corrected from an early age, particularly by his father, who disapproved of his nonconformity. This encounter is consistent with the idea of monitoring put out by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), where he says:

“He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.” (p. 202)

This gaze was internalized by Merchant, who controlled his own actions to conform to social norms. The fact that he is unable to openly express his queerness reflects the panoptic ways in which societal and familial institutions discipline people into heteronormative roles. In addition to being an issue of personal identity, Merchant's queerness caused discomfort for many around him. Despite growing up knowing that he was unique, he was unable to comprehend himself because there were neither words nor role models available. His father, who was a firm believer in patriarchy, wanted him to fit in, be a "real man," and continue the family name. Despite her greater empathy, his mother was unable to completely protect him from social pressures. He distanced himself from his peers and his own family by refusing to fit in—by rejecting stereotypical masculinity and choosing literature over sports. Therefore, surveillance functions as both an interior mechanism and an external force in Merchant's autobiography, influencing his identity and ultimately leading to his defiance of social norms. His autobiography itself turns into a protest, revealing and opposing the systems of authority that attempted to repress his sexual orientation.

Gender Performativity and Fragmented Desire

Merchant's initial experiences with sexuality were perplexing and distressing. He was terrified and confused after being introduced to the opportunistic side of human connections by a stranger's touch on an overcrowded train. In addition to feeling alienated from his male peers who participated in heteronormative behaviours, he battled with society's standards of masculinity. His disinterest in a *Playboy* centrefold, in contrast to the toxic masculinity of his surroundings, suggested that he was becoming homosexual.

"A group of boys gathered around a *Playboy* centrefold of a nude in a red veil. I was uninterested." (p. 08)

Feelings of guilt and loneliness were exacerbated by his family's denial of sexuality, particularly his mother's contemptuous reaction to his "wet dreams."

As demonstrated by his observation, Merchant's attraction to men was characterized by,

"I would first see feet, then groin, torso, face in that order" (p.10).

Using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this fragmented perception can be examined. Butler contends that sexual orientation and gender are socially produced rather than innate. Butler's assertion that

"Performativity is not a singular act but a repetition and a ritual." (*Gender Trouble*, p. 140)

is reflected in Merchant's split perspective, which implies that there is an internalized conflict between desire and social conventions.

The subaltern Queer Voice: Can Merchant Speak?

First proposed by Antonio Gramsci and then developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the word "subaltern" describes marginalized people who are excluded from hegemonic power structures, especially when it comes to representation and voice. Due to cultural, religious, and legal factors, queer people in India have always been ostracized and silent, considered subaltern. Hoshang Merchant, a homosexual man negotiating a strict, patriarchal, and heteronormative Indian society, represents the subaltern in *The Man Who Would Be Queen*. His story acts as a counter-discourse by expressing experiences that are frequently left out of the dominant literary and historical traditions. Gayatri Spivak contends in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) that marginalized identities are denied a voice, particularly those that are not part of the dominant sociopolitical frameworks. Merchant's work, which details his life and goals, overcomes this silence. His sceptical work questions the extermination of queer histories in India, claiming that:

"The subaltern cannot speak unless their discourse is legitimized within dominant structures." (Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?", p. 104).

Merchant purposefully reclaims his voice in his book, challenging this idea while also underlining the difficulties of speaking from a subaltern perspective. In addition to being marginalized as a gay man in a society that stigmatized and criminalized homosexuality, his queerness makes him doubly subaltern as an intellectual who opposes the cultural essentialism that was forced upon him. Writing his autobiography is a political act of resistance because it compels Indian society to recognize the existence and hardships of LGBT people. Spivak's claim is ultimately reinforced by Merchant's story, which shows that the subaltern can speak through literary expression and steadfast defiance. In Indian literary history, his work challenges prevailing myths and gives voice to LGBT subalternity.

Autobiography as Political Resistance

In addition to recounting personal experiences, Merchant's narrative actively challenges colonial and patriarchal norms. His resistance to heteronormativity and unreserved portrayal of his sexuality are consistent with the tradition of confessional queer writing. His book functions as a counter-narrative to India's sometimes sanitized literary past, reflecting Foucault's argument in *The History of Sexuality* (1976): "Where there is power, there is resistance." (p. 95). Merchant's work undermines mainstream discourses by revealing his queer identity and regaining agency.

Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* offers additional insight into the societal systems that marginalize queer people: "Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (p. 93). Merchant's art is a perfect example of how he resists these power structures, embraces his LGBT identity, and defies social norms.

Tendencies by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick emphasizes the subversive power of queerness: "Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, troublant" (Sedgwick, 1993, p. xii). Merchant's narrative, which functions as both a political act of resistance and a personal biography, exhibits this recurrent movement. In his 1999 edition of *Yaraana*, Hoshang Merchant states that being "gay" in India: "is not an ethic, not a religion, not a sub-culture, not a profession, not a sub-caste. Yet it is all-present, all pervasive, ever practised and ever secret. It comes upon you in unexpected places, in unexpected faces. It is shame, guilt, subversion ... honour and pride" (204).

People who identify as LGBT may feel inferior since they don't belong to the mainstream. The life of a homosexual or lesbian person in India is like riding a roller coaster; there are many ups and downs, twists, and turns, but those who do well in all of these circumstances carve out a niche for themselves. Although they have been a part of society for a long time, homosexuals have never been fully accepted. Although they have existed for a long time, homosexuals have never been fully embraced by society. These kinds of places, where homosexuals can be themselves and not have to disguise who they are, demonstrate how things are changing, but much more needs to be done.

Rebellion Through Art and Literature

Literature became his haven in the middle of this inner struggle. The words of authors who, like Merchant, defied convention gave him comfort. He was a fan of Anaïs Nin and Rimbaud, two people who lived beyond the bounds of conventional morality and

expectations. He saw a reflection of himself in their words—a queer person who defied social norms. His passion for literature and the arts went beyond simple adoration; it became his tool. He would make a place for himself in the world of ideas and poetry if the world did not accept him for who he was. This literary engagement also reflects Roland Barthes' *Death of the Author*, in which meaning is constructed by the individual rather than predetermined by society.

‘As everyone knows by now, I’m homosexual.’ To write this sentence and to speak it publicly, which is a great liberation, is why I write. – Hoshang Merchant

Conclusion

In postcolonial queer fiction, Hoshang Merchant's *The Man Who Would Be Queen* is a critical work that questions Western and Indian ideas about sexuality. Through the integration of theoretical frameworks from Butler, Spivak, and Foucault, this study has demonstrated how Merchant's autobiography negotiates subalternity, performativity, and surveillance. His life experience asserts LGBT visibility in a culture that frequently tries to eradicate it, making it more than just a personal recollection.

Merchant's work is a potent act of subversion because of his defiance of colonial legacies, his uncensored expression of queer desire, and his disobedience to social conventions. His text demonstrates that the subaltern may, in fact, communicate and serves as a monument to the tenacity of LGBT identities in India. His autobiography is proof that the subaltern can certainly speak and demonstrates the tenacity of gay identities in India.

Hoshang Merchant did not shatter in the face of rejection and condemnation; rather, he changed. He refused to let society's disapproval determine his value. Rather, he challenged the very foundations that aimed to eradicate him by using his art, intellect, and voice. By the end of this phase, he had evolved from a young man grappling with identity issues to a man forging his own path and getting ready to enter the wider world with poise and defiance. In addition to hardship, his narrative demonstrates fortitude and the bravery to live a true life in a society that encouraged lying. From the limitations of family and society to the freedom found in literature and self-expression, this journey is a potent illustration of the LGBT experience in India—a struggle between authenticity and conformity, resistance and repression, silence, and articulation.

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