



Interview with Minal Hajratwala

Editor, *Out! Stories from the New Queer India*

1. What can the reader expect from *Out! Stories from the New Queer India*?

- First, pleasure in reading and enjoying the stories. Second, an adventure! This book is a window into the contemporary LGBT experience in India. It is also a mirror, since the stories have universal themes and emotions that will resonate with readers regardless of identity.

2. Do you think the Indian audience is ready for a book on LGBT Literature?

- More than ready. The Indian audience is curious yet very tired of the stereotypical stories. Since the 377 verdict, the mainstream media has been covering queer issues almost every other day, and as a result people are hungry for information. They are looking to go beyond the conventional wisdom.
- There used to be a time where people did not want to admit that a gay community even existed in India; now it is clear that we are here and have always been here. Every time I speak on a panel or go to a public event, people are asking a lot of questions about the queer community and the queer issues.
- So this book can be seen as a collaborative attempt at providing answers, through the voices of actual LGBT people — rather than filtered through the media or through outdated and stereotyped views. *Out!* is a bridge between the LGBT community and the mainstream Indian audience.

3. Do you think the Indian audience will relate to this book?

- Absolutely. Indians will be able to relate to this book because we all have someone in our family, our neighborhood, or our community, who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Any Indian, if they think about it with an open mind, will realize that they have encountered a cousin, a schoolmate, a colleague, a person on the street who belongs to a sexual or gender minority. Moreover, thanks to activists and organizers, we now have pride parades and legal cases and media coverage of LGBT issues, so all Indians are curious about the real stories behind the headlines.



4. How would you describe this book? What is this book all about?

- *Out!* is about the experiences and the literary imagination of LGBT people in India. It is a collection of 30 stories that are diverse and come from all over — north, south, east, west India, and even the diaspora. I'm very happy we were able to include two stories in translation, one from Oriya and one from Tamil. It tells the stories of contemporary lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in India today, post the landmark Section 377 ruling which decriminalised homosexuality in 2009.
- It is also one of the very few Indian books that includes a whole spectrum of the queer community, not just one segment. It encompasses stories of gay men, lesbians, bisexual men and women, and transgender and transsexual people, as well as the heterosexual characters who fill — and fill out — our lives.
- Most of the stories are fictional, totally original, and some are very adventurous — for example, there is a story in the anthology from the perspective of a mosquito. This is how fantastical it can get, but at the same time you can sense the struggles and the emotions which keep it real. It's a showcase of the literary talent of the community.

5. What are the prominent themes and issues that are covered in the book?

- Every story features at least one LGBT character, but other than that, the book is not at all limited to one theme or issue. Themes of all literature can be found in this anthology: identity, one's relationship and negotiation with society, romance, relationships, mortality, politics, family dynamics, pop culture. We also have themes more particular to the community such as coming out, struggles with gender stereotypes, and so on.
- Amidst this diversity, what these stories share is the expression of previously untold lives.

6. How has been the response so far?

- Fantastic. We are extremely happy and pleased with the way people have received the book. The community especially has been so supportive, and the Indian and international media have been enthusiastic. It is clear that people are ready to share this book to connect and educate, as well as enjoy a fun literary journey. I



am particularly glad to see that the book is being taken seriously by reviewers in India and is not being marginalized as an issue.

7. How did you start working on *Out!*?

- Shobhna and I met at the Mumbai launch of my book *Leaving India*. She came to the event with a lot of enthusiasm and positive energy because she had just launched Queer Ink as an online retailer of books. Later we became friends and she was talking about how the readers who came to her were looking for contemporary, queer, Indian stories. And there was very little available. In her catalog she had queer books from the West, she had some Indian queer books that were older, but very little in the contemporary space, and especially very little that speaks to lesbians, to transgender people, to bisexual people, not only gay men.
- To fill this void, she decided to take the leap to becoming a publisher, and I agreed to be editor, and we developed the idea for the anthology together.
- Since the Section 377 verdict in 2009, the Queer community in India has evolved and taken on a more visible presence. More people are comfortable being out of the closet, and the external perception, via the media, has also broadened and changed. We wanted a book which represents and stands for these changes and with the stories are told by queer people themselves.
- We launched the call for submissions at Jaipur Lit Fest in 2010, and we spread the word among writers as well as LGBT organizations and email lists about the anthology. We received approximately 100 submissions of stories or story ideas. This validated our view that there is so much queer literature out there but the platform was missing. Our project is like a bridge which connects these writers to the readers who are hungry for their stories.

8. On what basis did you shortlist the stories?

- The first and the most important thing we kept in mind while developing the 30 stories for the book was the literary quality.
- Next we were looking for originality: unfamiliar and untold stories. We tried to limit the stereotypical picture of the queer community; certain issues such as lesbian suicide have been written about quite a lot, so we wanted to make sure to offer a more diverse and balanced picture.



- If they did have a familiar theme, such as coming out, then I was looking for an element of differentiation: a twist in the tale, a particularly compelling character, a unique setting, or a narrative voice that set the story apart.
- To review the submissions, we formed a small editorial committee. All of us read every single story, and we individually rated them “Yes,” “No,” and “Maybe.” If we all agreed, it was an automatic “Yes” or “No.” Where we disagreed or were unsure, we discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the stories, how they could be developed or strengthened. Eventually as the editor I took a call.

9. How was your experience working on this project?

- Working with the writers was absolutely fantastic and fulfilling. We live in a country with so much diversity and this book is all about that. Each writer is from a different place with varied experiences and with his or her own style of writing.
- For example, one of the stories is about a professional biker who spoke to a reporter in an interview format, which was then converted into an insightful and poignant first-person narrative. Another story was beautiful except that the writer lacked an ending, so over the course of a few months of editing, I coached her to develop an ending that was satisfying and complete.
- Some of the stories came in fully realized, and required only a little editing, while other writers benefited from more development to strengthen their characters, clarify the plots, and so on. It was so much fun to get to know each of the writers and also to see how their stories subtly connected with each other.

10. How was it interacting with Nandita Das and Chitra Palekar for the last piece in the book, the dialogue with them?

- It was an absolute pleasure. They are both very warm and friendly, and since they know each other well, during the interview they were able to be very candid and natural.
- Both of them have been activists and allies on behalf of the LGBT community, but prior to this conversation, they had not spoken much to each other about their LGBT advocacy work. Nandita’s journey was as an actor playing a woman who falls in love with another woman in *Fire*, and dealing with the public backlash afterward. Chitra’s journey has been as the mother of a lesbian, who instead of being privately ashamed like some parents, has become an outspoken advocate of



gay human rights and a support system for other families. With us they were able to open up and tell the whole story about how each of them came to develop and voice their views about LGBT oppression, and the challenges and joys they encountered along the way.

- It is a groundbreaking interview and we all left Nandita's apartment that day with a warm and familial feeling.

11. Any other story from the book that you would like to highlight? And why?

- Oh, that is like asking a grandmother to choose only one of her grandchildren for a hug! All of the stories are very special to me.

12. Define LGBT literature.

- I think LGBT literature is in the process of defining itself. It is not a genre; LGBT books can be in any genre from romance to science fiction to biography to poetry and more. Instead it is a hybrid and diverse field that describes the writers, the content, or both. It also includes experimental as well as conventional ways of telling stories. LGBT literature is definitely still developing, and new writers are emerging every day.

13. Do you think it is a good idea to have a separate category for LGBT literature?

- There are pros and cons. A category can help a book to reach its audience, so that readers who are looking for a queer book do not have to hunt for it amid all the other books. It can also help put works in the context of other books in the field, creating a dialogue between the texts. So a category can be very useful for marketing and scholarship.
- On the other hand, it's important to allow individual writers to have their own identities and not pigeonhole them. If the desire is to marginalize and dismiss ("it's just a gay novel"), then we have to resist such simplistic categorization. And we have to remember that our categories are always shifting. Twenty years ago "transgender literature" might not have been a category at all, and now it is coming into its own.

14. What is your take on queer writing in India?

- Queer writing in India is coming out. Spaces have opened up which were invisible earlier, and this has attracted a new community of voices. There are some brilliant



writers in this genre. And heterosexual writers have started incorporating gay characters in their stories, with varying degrees of success.

- One thing that distinguishes Indian queer stories on the world stage is that, in India, family members seem to play a key role in almost every story. This is different from stories in the West which sometimes seem to take place in a magical gay ghetto. In India many queer people remain very much engaged in their families, and the stories reflect this reality.

15. Has LGBT literature picked up world over?

- Yes, it is now an established field of literature and has its own serious infrastructure of awards, writing workshops, hierarchies, university studies, and so on.

16. Do queer writers/queer stories get easily published nowadays? Are publishers skeptical about the same?

- Publishing of LGBT literature has managed to crawl into the mainstream slowly and gradually. Publishers are more open now than in the past, but prejudice and misperception still exists. A lot depends upon the mindset of the acquisitions editor and the politics of the press, which can vary a great deal.

17. What do you think is the future of LGBT literature in India?

- The future is very bright. LGBT literature is still at a very young stage, so there are literally thousands of queer writers who are waiting to be discovered or to discover their own voices. Heterosexual writers are also beginning to incorporate lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender characters in their stories. I believe that in the coming decades we will see much more LGBT literature coming out, from the most innovative and creative writers of our country.